

milf smackdown

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milf smackdown

by [garlicbread](#)

Summary

Jinsol Kim and Sooyoung Ha are wealthy CEOs with extremely successful careers. However, one's success often causes neglect in certain aspects of personal life - for Jinsol and Sooyoung, it's their respective daughters. After relentless urging from their wives, Jinsol and Sooyoung both decide to take some time off and join their daughters' middle school PTA, make up for lost time, and give Choerry and Hyejoo an unforgettably amazing 8th grade year.

(If they don't kill each other first.)

Notes

Daniela (the funny one) and I have been putting our last brain cells together to construct this storyline for over a month now, so y'all better EAT IT! Inspired by this tweet [<https://tinyurl.com/y29936ft>], and many more like it. Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I just feel like there’s something off about her.”

Jungeun’s finger retreats from the doorbell as she turns to look at her wife, who is staring intently at the closed door to the modern home with narrowed eyes. The Southern California breeze blows gently through Jinsol’s blonde hair, Prada sunglasses resting on her head. She carries the large gift bag, while Jungeun holds a bouquet. “Who?”

“Sooyoung.”

Jungeun snorts and rolls her eyes. “You’ve never even met her.”

“I saw her! At the Gala. You know the one. She looks like she *knows*... something.” Her wife giggles at the statement.

“You’re being ridiculous, Sol.”

Jinsol breaks her staring contest with the door to turn and crinkle her nose playfully at Jungeun. “You love it though.”

To which Jungeun blushes. “Yes... Yes, I do.” Years into their marriage will always melt away whenever she catches Jinsol looking at her the same tender way she did on their first date. Jungeun hastily steals a kiss before anyone can open the door.

And then, she remembers. Shifting uncomfortably, she says “Although there is something you should know about Sooy-”

“EEEEEEEEEE!” The giddy squeal is so loud that the door visibly vibrates. It swings open, and there stands sunshine herself - Jiwoo Ha, complete with her loose waves, strapless floral dress, and signature giant smile. “JUNGIE!” The bubbly woman practically jumps on her best friend, who reciprocates the affection with a warm embrace. “I haven’t seen you in so long! How’s the company? How’s Choerry? How’s - JINSOL!”

The blonde barely manages to choke out a greeting after Jiwoo envelops her just as tightly. Breaking away, she clasps her hands together, beaming at her favorite couple at her doorstep. “It’s so nice to see you both! Thank you for coming!”

“You know we’d never miss my goddaughter’s third birthday,” assures Jungeun endearingly.

Jiwoo welcomes them inside, and Jinsol takes in the multi-million dollar home in person for the first time. She knew from the magazine photos it had been featured in that the Ha residence was exceptionally lavish, but she didn’t expect it to this extent. The interior design was impeccable. Simple tones of black, white, and the occasional walnut wood framed the house, while gorgeous lush furniture was minimalistically arranged. And all around - glass, to view the evergreen shrouding the estate, the largest pool Jinsol has ever seen, and a massive pink bounce house that children are currently enjoying. Many more adults socialize outside, some family and some friends from work.

Katy Perry’s “Hot N Cold” plays throughout the house’s built-in stereo system as toddlers run

through the trio's legs, Jiwoo's homemade red velvet cupcakes in hand. The radiant hostess leads them to the center of the house, where the common areas are bountifully decorated with gold and pink. Lustrous balloons display the words "HAPPY BIRTHDAY HYEJOO!"

Jinsol spots the birthday girl dressed in a princess dress and tiara, playing with other girls on the floor. Jiwoo pouts upon seeing Hyejoo excitedly whip out a rubber snake, appearing to greatly enjoy terrifying the other girls in front of her. "Why is she not playing with the \$400 doll I bought her?" Jinsol and Jungeun chuckle at the sight, and Jiwoo calls her daughter. "I hope you didn't get her a doll in that big gift bag of yours."

Jungeun and Jinsol share a knowing smile. "Oh don't worry, we didn't."

Little Hyejoo comes running over to the trio, then clings to her mother's leg. She practically hides herself behind Jiwoo, jet black hair falling to cover her face. With parted lips, she looks up curiously at the couple in front of her.

"Do you remember Auntie Jungeun and Auntie Jinsol?" Jiwoo asks. Hyejoo nods very slowly, not convincing anyone. "They brought you a gift!"

Jinsol takes a knee to meet Hyejoo's eye level, and sets the sizable bag down in front of her. The blonde gives the toddler a kind smile, who begins to approach the bag. The three year-old looks up at her mother in uncertainty. "You can open it, princess," Jiwoo whispers.

Hyejoo rustles through the wrapping tissue for a few moments, then gasps loudly. With wide eyes and a shocked smile, she pulls the large wolf plush toy out of the bag. Everyone's heart warms at the little girl's reaction as she hugs the wolf tightly in her arms.

"What do you say?"

Hyejoo is shy, and avoids eye contact with Jungeun and Jinsol. But she shocks them all when she runs straight into Jinsol's arms, burying her face in the blonde hair. "Thank... you." She says another thank you to Jungeun, who leans down and hugs her goddaughter tight, whispering a happy birthday. And just as quickly as Hyejoo came, she was gone, running off with the wolf plushie in another direction.

"I love her..." Jinsol says while getting back up.

Jiwoo smiles. "I think she loves you too. She threatened to stab me with her plastic fork when I told her she had to wear a tiara."

"So... how'd you get it on?"

"Well, I had a steak knife, so."

Jinsol stares mouth agape at Jiwoo, who reaches in to take the flowers graciously from Jungeun's hands. She walks to place them on one of the many full tables of presents. Just then, another quartet of children flurry past the women, screaming. Jiwoo takes one look around the pandemonium before her, and offers to take them somewhere quieter to catch up.

And so they do - Jinsol and Jungeun follow Jiwoo to enter a spacious, octagonal sunroom extending out from the kitchen. The room has enormous glass walls, along with a door to enter the backyard. The women take their comfortable seats around the table in the center, bathed in the light streaming in from all directions.

"So..." Jiwoo smiles at them with bright eyes. "How's my favorite couple?"

The blonde and brunette lock eyes and smile. They tell Jiwoo about their jobs, their daughter Choerry (who just turned three as well), and some of the chaotic antics that occur in their household. Jungeun looks to Jiwoo deadpanned and says “Jinsol is clearly the favorite parent. Last week she got her a zamboni. Who gets a three year-old an actual zamboni?”

“She *loves* them!”

“We don’t even have an ice skating rink!”

“Well, we could install one.” Jinsol is entirely serious.

Jiwoo’s eyes dart back and forth, amused. “ *We are not installing an ice skating rink in our backyard.* ”

“I was thinking more of an expansion to the house-”

While Jungeun rejects her wife’s construction plans, Jiwoo hears the increasing, familiar sound of heels hitting the floor. She looks to the doorway to see her beautiful, stressed wife approach their kitchen counter. Jiwoo watches her slightly lean over, and take a breath with closed eyes.

“Is everything okay honey?” Jiwoo asks from afar. Sooyoung looks over to her, and instantly smiles in relief. Jiwoo beckons her to the room.

“I need a drink after that.” Jinsol stops fighting for the ice skating rink at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. She looks to the source, and is stunned when she recognizes the statuesque woman walking up to their table. From the way her long black dress gloriously accentuated her every curve, to her seemingly perfectly sculpted facial features, the woman was utterly magnetic - and Jinsol was speechless. She’d only seen Sooyoung Ha from afar, never this close. And in her proximity, the blonde could not possibly attribute anything to her aura other than sheer power.

Sooyoung was now at Jiwoo’s side, smiling down at her wife. “Everything’s alright now, just... That one kid with the Tupac shirt kept trying to steal Hyejoo’s presents.”

Jiwoo nods. “Ah. Yeojin.”

Sooyoung’s attention shifts to the two women in front of her wife, eyes widening. “Is that... Jungeun Kim?!” She goes over to the seated brunette with a big smile and leans down for a tight hug, returned with matched energy by a giddy Jungeun. “And your hair is back to brown! I haven’t seen it like this since business school!”

Jinsol, ignored, pauses. *Wait... they’ve known each other since college?* Sooyoung, after what feels like whole decades, finally notices her. “And you must be Jinsol!” She leans down to give Jinsol a hug, and Jinsol is thrown for a loop at her spellbinding musky scent. Her eyes widen, and she has to thoroughly talk herself out of completely smothering her face in Sooyoung’s hair. Her perfume is one of the best scents Jinsol has ever come into contact with, and she stares dumbfounded when she breaks away. “So nice to meet you, Jinsol. I’m Sooyoung Ha,” she says, with a voice like honey.

Jinsol rotates between wanting to say *I know* and *Wow* before finally just saying... “Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes I’m... uh.” Jungeun stares at her from behind Sooyoung with an embarrassed, *What are you doing* smile. “I’m Jinsol.” She’s finally re-learned how to speak clearly, it seems, and extends out her hand. “Oh my God. Nevermind.” *Why would you shake her hand after you’ve already hugged*

her, you clown?

Sooyoung just laughs, and the sound is simply angelic. “Let me just get a drink.” She steps away to the cabinet behind the blonde to pick out a bottle of red wine. Jinsol whips out her phone under the table.

Jinsol: She smells like Fergie’s discography

Jungeun: What does that even mean

Jinsol: Fergalicious

Jungeun: Stop

“Jungeun was just telling me about how Jinsol bought Choerry a zamboni,” Jiwoo chimes from the other side of the table, smiling.

Sooyoung stops pouring the wine into her glass and whips around, perfectly straight black hair swaying, and hitting Jinsol in the face. The blonde flinches, but the standing woman doesn’t seem to notice. “A... whole zamboni?”

“Yeah it’s just kind of... Sitting in our garage.” Jinsol stares into space and starts to truly realize that she bought her daughter a zamboni and has no place to store or use it. Maybe she should have thought this through.

The tall woman pulls her chair back to sit, subtly sliding her hand onto Jiwoo's thigh in seemingly one smooth motion. She still had not broken eye contact with Jinsol, staring her down in such a calculating manner that she swore Sooyoung was looking at her through a microscope. Her gaze is calm, yet analytical. Competitive. Jinsol has no idea why, but she can feel that Sooyoung is trying to pierce her surface.

“Isn’t that sweet honey? She already bought Choerry her first car,” Jiwoo says.

Silence.

Jungeun stares at Jiwoo, then at her wife, who is staring at the table wide-eyed and a smile threatening to ruin her straight face. “Jiwoo...” Jungeun doesn’t really know what to say. “You know what a zamboni is right?”

“Yeah, the Italian sports car?”

Jinsol has no idea how, but Sooyoung is still looking at Jiwoo like she is the best thing since sliced bread. “Baby, that’s a Lamborghini.”

“Lamborghini, zamboni, panini... they’re all vehicles it’s fine!”

Jinsol’s jaw drops and while the couple in front of them talk, she whips out her phone again under the table.

Jinsol: I have to laugh

“So, Jinsol! What do you do?” The lesbian billionaire's Korean accent adds a sense of elegance to the question.

“Oh - I’m...” Why was this woman putting her at a loss for words for describing something as

simple as her own job? “I’m the president and CEO of Aquarium of the Pacific.”

Sooyoung eyes flicker while the wine glass is pressed up to her lips. “Woow...!” Jinsol can’t help but thinking that whatever exactly that was sounded a bit pandering. “That is impressive!”

“She’s a DOCTOR!” Jiwoo supplements.

“Of philosophy. In oceanography. What do you do?”

Sooyoung lets out a breathy laugh. “I’m actually president and CEO of Yves Saint Laurent.” *Saint Laurent. The Saint Laurent.*

Holy shit. “So... that’s why you smell so good!” Sooyoung just laughs some more, while Jiwoo beams at her with pride. Jinsol has aspired, researched, and managed for years and years to get the life she has today, but for some reason hearing flawless Sooyoung’s airy laugh before her makes it all feel like child’s play. All she can do is stare at her, nervously paralyzed and awestruck.

“Where did you get your degree, doctor?”

“Johns Hopkins. But before that, I did my thesis at Harvard.”

“*Really,*” Sooyoung says. “I spent some years at Harvard too!”

How uncanny, Jinsol thinks. *Is there a single flaw about her?*

Jiwoo and Jungeun share entertained expressions sipping from their wine glasses during their wives’ elitist exchange.

Jiwoo reaches for her wife’s hand and intertwines their fingers, then looks at Jinsol taking her first sip of wine. “Isn’t this world so crazy? Jungeun and I have been friends since high school, you and Sooyoung went to the same school, Sooyoung and Jungeun had a one night stand, and now we have kids the same age!”

Jinsol splurts out her drink.

It’s many hours and many MANY short, awkward conversations later when Jungeun and Jinsol Kim finally exit the Ha residence. The sky is dark, but bright lights on the ground outside the house light the way. In addition to illuminating the premises though, the lights also made clear the glare Jinsol had plastered on her face ever since she found out that her wife had slept with the owner of the property they were walking on.

“I tried to tell you!”

“*When?*”

“Outside, right before Jiwoo opened the door.” Jinsol just sighs and drags her hand over her face in response, fighting the urge to just collapse on top of Sooyoung’s black Bugatti parked beside her.

“Baby, please.”

“This is so weird,” Jinsol murmurs, muffled and looking at Jungeun through fingers still on her face. Her wife softly smiles.

“It was once. During college. And it didn’t mean anything, we never became anything afterwards.”

The brunette walks up to her on the driveway, gently grips her wrist, and slowly removes the hand from her face. She looks up at her wife and chuckles, cupping her cheeks. "You know that we're married right? And that I have a daughter with you?"

Jinsol pouts, but leans into her favorite person's touch. "I don't... like the image in my mind of *Sooyoung Ha* -"

"Jinsol." The blonde stops avoiding eye contact to look at her wife, who is already gazing at her lovingly. Jungeun runs the pad of her thumb over Jinsol's soft cheek, golden in the light. "There is no need to be upset over this. The only person I love more than anything in this world is you." And with those words, Jinsol swears she feels her heart blossom within her chest. Jungeun will never cease to be the calm to her chaos, the medicine to all her worries, and her best friend through it all.

"I love you." Jinsol closes the distance between them for a sweet, slow kiss. And Jungeun whispers the same three words on her lips.

When the shorter woman breaks away, she turns to walk down the lengthy driveway. "Come on, let's go home." Jinsol fishes her keys out of her purse, is about to follow her wife, but hesitates.

She remembers when high and mighty Sooyoung Ha said Spongebob is for losers. Jinsol is suddenly filled with immense rage that floods into her arms, and she can't not flail them around.

"I JUST THINK IT'S *FUNNY* HOW-"

SCREEEECH!

Jungeun whips around at the noise, then gasps in absolute horror at what she sees. Sooyoung's brand new black Bugatti now had a glaringly obvious, diagonal white cut spanning from the middle of the passenger's door all the way to the bottom of the window. And right above it, frozen in place, was Jinsol's hand and her sharp car key in it. She can't even get the words out that it was an accident.

Jungeun has no idea how it happened.

All that she really knows is that Jinsol just keyed billionaire Sooyoung Ha's new car.

Jinsol is petrified. Jungeun is in utter disbelief. The two take one look at each other - and they bolt to their car as fast as they can.

"Hi, I'll order the Chef's salad."

"Jungie that is so rude... just order your own."

Ten years later, and Jungeun still doesn't know what to say to Jiwoo sometimes.

The waiter walks away with their orders, perplexed. The best friends sit across from each other in their favorite Koreatown café, catching up as they do every few weeks or so. Their plentiful shopping bags are strewn beneath the table in piles, and the heat of their latte cups warm their hands, cold from the rain outside. "Anyways, what was I saying?"

Jungeun takes another careful sip. "Hyejoo."

"Oh yes! So our new babysitter keeps telling me that every time she tries to play with Hyejoo she

gets told to die.” Jungeun snorts. “I keep telling her that she’s never going to get her to play. Who tries to play with a 13 year-old?”

“That sure sounds like Hyejoo.” Jungeun rests her heavy head on her palm, and nearly lets her tired eyes shut when the flashing of cameras outside grabs her attention. She sees a group of teenagers in raincoats outside the café window, excitedly taking pictures of them. She points them out amusedly to Jiwoo. “You sure have quite the fanclub now, don’t you?”

Jiwoo grins at them and does her world famous apple heart. Jungeun watches as the kids outside go wild and return the gesture. One of the giddy teen boys heavily breathes onto the café window and draws a gigantic heart.

“This is cult-like.” Jungeun smiles. Can she really blame them, though? She watched from the beginning as the world fell in love with Jiwoo as the legendary international baking sensation ‘Chuu.’ One day, Jiwoo was asking her how to make a Youtube channel. The next, a massive poster of Jiwoo’s holding cupcakes was scaring the shit out of her at the local grocery store.

As Jiwoo waves goodbye to the kids, she looks back to her best friend who seems to be falling asleep on her hand. “Jungie?” She shakes her head and apologizes. “Why do you look so exhausted!” Jiwoo grabs Jungeun’s hand from across the table, deeply concerned.

“I’m just a bit tired, Jiwoo.”

“A bit?”

“A lot,” Jungeun admits, looking away. “I’ve been trying to manage the bank and driving Choerry now that school’s started. And she needs to be there so early for all those clubs.” She smiles fondly, remembering how outgoing her daughter is. Even though she’s strict with her, she’ll always be proud of Choerry. But she slowly rubs her eyes with the pads of her fingers, and exhales. “And I don’t want to hire a driver because she already barely sees one of her moms as is.”

Jiwoo pouts at her and squeezes her hand. “Oh Jungie...” With her other hand, she reaches for her latte, trying to brainstorm a way out of her best friend’s predicament. “Have you talked to Jinsol about this?” Before the delivery of the question had even finished, Jungeun is shaking her head and shoos her idea away.

“She’s so busy with the aquarium, always in business meetings that run too late... And she can’t really... help it. I don’t want to bother her.” It’s on the tip of her tongue, but she doesn’t say it - she really, really wishes she had her help.

Jiwoo scoffs into her latte cup lid. “Reminds me of Sooyoung,” she remarks, barely audible.

Jungeun stops, eyes wide. “Wait-” Despite the countless times the two have shopped, grabbed coffee, and taken girls trips, this was one topic that they’ve remarkably never opened up about. The idea of Jiwoo being able to relate to this would take a big weight off her shoulders. “Really?”

“Yes! Oh my gosh! Always at work. And when she’s home... She never. Talks. To Hyejoo. I get that our daughter is... You know... Emo... But you should at least make the effort! Maybe she’s emo because her other mom doesn’t talk to her!” Jiwoo, clearly fed up, has Jungeun in complete shock. For over ten years, the brunette had always thought of those three as the virtually perfect, unproblematic family.

“Wow.” It’s all too familiar; Jungeun cannot believe her ears. “When Jinsol’s home, she doesn’t make an effort to spend time with Choerry either.”

“Now that surprises me. Jinsol always seems so thoughtful and loving.”

“She just... I don’t know. They used to be two peas in a pod, too. Best friends.” Jungeun stares to her side at the café window, covered in sinking raindrops. “I just don’t see her making effort to try and get that back.” The words hurt even more as she releases them into the air. With furrowed brows, she looks back at Jiwoo, who rubs her thumb over her best friend’s hand.

“Well, we’re in quite the pickle.” Jungeun nods at Jiwoo’s words, and the two reach for their drinks again.

And just like that, mid-sip, Jiwoo’s eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets. “What?” Jiwoo is now clapping like seal. “Jiwoo, what?!” She gives Jungeun a mischievous smile, and all Jungeun can think of is that it’s the same smile Jiwoo had before she drilled 3 holes in her living room ceiling because she thought it would be better than an intercom. *“I have the BEST idea.”*

“Oh God-”

“We make them join the PTA.”

All Jungeun can think of is that she’s never heard anything more unthinkable in her life. And this is coming from the person who insisted to Jungeun that she caught the cold because her computer had a virus. “That’s never going to happen.”

“*No! Jungieeee!*” Jiwoo loudly slams her hand on the table, drawing the attention of everyone in the café. Jungeun puts her face in her hands. “Think about it. You and I both know that they don’t spend time with the kids anymore. And it’s eighth grade! Pretty soon they’ll be in high school and then college and then putting us in nursing homes and then we’re DEAD!”

“Jeez-”

“Jungeun Kim. This is such a great idea.” Jiwoo speaks with admirable confidence, but Jungeun is still wincing, unconvinced.

“They’d never willingly do that. They’re CEOs... You know they both just like to donate massively to the school from afar. And not to mention the fact that they... are not the best of friends...” Jungeun practically whispers the last words, as if someone was going to police her for discussing The Feud That Must Not Be Named.

“Then they can finally be friends!”

“Jiwoo. They don’t want to be.” Jinsol and Sooyoung? Working together? All year? Just the idea makes Jungeun shudder in fear of impending chaos.

“Well we can always trick them into joining.”

Jungeun laughs, looking away. “You’re crazy.”

“I’m serious.” And when Jungeun looks back at Jiwoo, she sees in her eyes that she really is. “Come *on!* The unofficial first meeting where they go over the year’s events is Monday night, at that one Italian place. Let’s get them to go to that.”

Jungeun, shaking her head in disbelief, looks down at the table. She could never get Jinsol to come. But in response to her head shaking, all Jiwoo mischievously says is “I’ll do my part. I’ll guilt Sooyoung into coming.”

“I don’t... think-”

“Come on! Get Jinsol to come.”

Jungeun, with an incredulous expression, says “And so what if they do? That doesn’t mean they’ll do PTA.”

But the younger girl ignores her best friend’s pessimism. “Jungie. Please. This will be so fun.” Jiwoo doesn’t get a response. “The kids need this. We all need this.” Still nothing. “At least... think about it.”

And before Jungeun walks out of the café in the rain that day, she promises Jiwoo that she will. Even though she’s already 100% sure the answer will always be no.

Chapter End Notes

If this made you feel any positive emotion at all (and if you loved certain parts in particular) please let us know in the comments! Stay tuned... Much more to come!

ask us things

- curiouscat.me/catmsdqna (Cat)

First PTA Meeting (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

Now that it's summer, updates will be coming more often! Also, this is not an Yvesoul romance fic **THEY ARE MARRIED YOU WHORES**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jiwoo's swift, rhythmic chopping of the vegetables is the only source of noise in the house before the front door opens. Heels hit the floor and she smiles, knowing just who it is without needing to look up.

She senses the taller woman enter the area in her peripheral. But instead of being greeted normally, she sees the fashion industry's queen silently stroll behind her. Jiwoo can't stop the goofy smile on her face as warm arms slowly slide under hers, enveloping her, Sooyoung's body flush against her back. "Hi sweetheart," her melodic voice soft by her wife's ear.

Jiwoo puts the knife down, and rests her hands on top Sooyoung's around her waist. Completely at peace, she relaxes into her lover's embrace. "Hi," she says in response, and Sooyoung can hear the smile in her voice.

She rests her chin snug on Jiwoo's shoulder, and looks down at the colorful assortment of vegetables in front of her. "What are you up to?"

"Just a little meal prep for the week."

"Can I have some?" Sooyoung jokes.

Jiwoo giggles. "You know I'll always make some for you." Sooyoung squeezes her tight and says a cheery little thank you. Jiwoo marvels at how lucky she is to have the most intimidating woman in the world reduced to nothing but sweetness, for her eyes only. "How was your day baby?"

She lets out a tired sigh. "It was okay. There are the incompetent men, as per usual," she hums. "But it was good. Got to come home early." Jiwoo's breath hitches as she feels the woman's lips suddenly ghost over her neck, then trail up to her ear. "I missed you, though," she whispers, and Jiwoo hears the desire in every syllable.

The celebrity baker turns out of Sooyoung's arms to face her, and she will never get bored of just how electrifyingly beautiful the woman she married is. Smirking, she runs her fingers up the taller woman's toned arms over the thin dark blouse. "Aren't you supposed to miss me every day?"

Sooyoung tucks the hair strands that have fallen from Jiwoo's messy bun away from her face, lust dancing in her eyes. "You know I always do." She closes the space between them to connect their lips with a deep kiss. Which quickly intensifies.

Soon, Jiwoo's fingers are laced through Sooyoung's hair, and the latter has her pressed against the kitchen island with hands roaming up and gripping the back of her thighs.

But before Jiwoo can enjoy herself too much, she remembers her brilliant plan of the year. "Wait, wait," she says, breathy, breaking away. "I have to talk to you about something."

The CEO pouts, clearly interrupted from getting what she's been waiting for all day. "Can't it wait?" she says in a low, assertive voice that makes Jiwoo shudder. As much as she wants it to though, she knows that her memory span of a literal baboon can't let this wait for anyone.

"Nooooo, this is serious." Sooyoung raises her hands to rest them on her wife's hips, and nods for her to continue. "I... You're doing PTA with me this year."

Sooyoung stares at her, expressionless. And then, she begins to chuckle. "That's a good one."

Jiwoo doesn't flinch. "I'm serious." *How come no one thinks I'm serious?!* Her wife continues to look at her in disbelief.

"...Oh no. Oh no no no." Sooyoung laughs even more. The sound is fascinatingly both dulcet and mocking, increasing in volume even as she gracefully shields her mouth with her hand. "I won't do that."

"And why not?" Sooyoung stops and widens her eyes at Jiwoo.

The smaller woman challenges her confidently. "You heard me."

"I'm - not - I'm not," to which Jiwoo interrupts by imitating the stuttering.

"Not answering the question."

Sooyoung starts to stammer again, and Jiwoo clowns her until the taller woman flares her nostrils in frustration. Jiwoo lets out a sigh.

"Listen," she commands, and Sooyoung clearly doesn't want to. "Just come with me to the first meeting of the year tomorrow night. I already told the babysitter to come. Plus, you owe it to the PTA-"

"I don't owe anything to them, Jiwoo. They already have thousands from me," she says matter-of-factly, and Jiwoo rolls her eyes.

"They have thousands from you, yet I've been asked multiple times if we're *divorced* because they only ever see me." Sooyoung looks away in quiet shame.

"Jiwoo... I don't belong in PTA-"

"AAAAAARGH!" The piercing, animalistic scream coming from Hyejoo's room upstairs reverberates through the walls and reaches the couple loud and clear. Neither of them are alarmed though; they know their daughter's *I just got sniped* scream when they hear it.

"See. Even she doesn't want to hear your excuses," Jiwoo adds with a proud smile, and her wife rolls her eyes.

"Speaking of Hyejoo... You don't spend time with her." The CEO immediately tries to interject, but Jiwoo continues. "She's growing up right before our eyes, and you don't even try to talk to her. You avoid her, even! Last night you burned your tongue trying to finish the rest of your soup because she was coming down the stairs. What was that?"

"First of all... My tongue wasn't burnt."

"Sooyoung. I walked in on you in the bathroom trying to wrap gauze around it."

"Jiwoo," She inhales deeply. "You know how she is. I don't want to... meddle." In Sooyoung's

eyes, she is just treating her daughter the same way her parents treated her. And she turned out fine, so is there really a problem?

“What you *don’t* want to do is get your hands dirty.” And after Jiwoo says it, she puckers her lips and looks away. Sooyoung looks at her, offended and a little impressed, wondering when the hell her wife became such a spitfire. “You need to meddle, even if it’s just a bit. You need to know what’s going on in her life, honey. That’s what moms do.” Jiwoo reaches for Sooyoung’s hands and laces their fingers together. “She looks... okay... But we don’t know if she’s *really* okay.” Sooyoung looks out the window in thought, tongue in cheek. “And there are some things that she just won’t talk to me about. You two have more of... a similar energy.”

“I guess...” Sooyoung cringes, hard. “...that I can try to talk to her more. But I don’t know about PTA.”

“Just come with me tomorrow night. Please.” Jiwoo needs to beg and do her puppy-dog eyes for what feels like ten minutes straight before Sooyoung finally stops her cringing and agrees. The bubbly baker squeals happily, and wraps her wife in a tight hug.

The sky has just begun to warm up on the early Monday morning, orange hues painting the eastern sky. Jungeun drives the black BMW with tired eyes, approaching the window of the Starbucks drive-thru in silence. It’s barely 7am, but Choerry texts furiously in the back seat.

The driver rolls down the tinted window and is greeted by an upbeat barista in green. “One caramel macchiato... and one pink drink.” They exchange the cup holder for the card in her hand, then thank yous and have a nice days.

Jungeun leans over the console to hand Choerry her god awful, cough syrup-like fruit concoction, and she smiles excitedly. “Thanks mom.” The driver turns back around to pull away from the coffee shop.

“Oh- mom?”

“Mm.”

“Can you sign my permission slip?”

Jungeun’s eyes flicker in annoyance. “You’re asking me while I’m driving? I thought I told you to ask your mom at dinner last night while I was working.”

“I did but...” Choerry’s voice falters, deviating from her normal peppy, animated tone. “She just gave me my food. And left to make a business call.” The 8th grader attempts at masking the sadness in her voice. Nevertheless, it rings through the air without warning, and cuts through Jungeun’s heart.

Her mother falls silent as she continues to drive, the glow of her soft blue headlights piercing the misty air. One million thoughts and more run through her head.

But all she says is - “I’ll sign it before you get out.”

And as she follows the familiar road to school, Jungeun, for the first time, finally allows herself to think that maybe Jiwoo was right after all.

“No, Yeojin, I will not turn on Nicki Minaj radio.”

Yeojin, disappointed, turns in her chair to face the table behind her. “Sorry Chae, I tried.”

It’s the first Monday since school started last week, and Ms. Vivi Wong’s 8th grade art class is as lively as ever. The kids, seated in pairs at rectangular tables all across the room, work diligently (or so Vivi hopes) on finishing their first assignment of the year - the insightful self-portrait. Vivi herself sits at the front of the class, drawing quietly with them in solidarity as she usually does with every assignment she gives to her beloved class.

A paper airplane lightly lands on Chaewon’s desk, with the words ‘OPEN ME’ written neatly on the wing. Recognizing handwriting immediately, the blonde carefully unfolds the paper, and is greeted with a beautiful, intricate butterfly.

Chaewon turns to the back of the classroom, and she and Hyejoo lock eyes and smile tenderly at each other.

“AWW!” Hyejoo instantly winces at the shrill voice of her seat partner - the living, breathing, human headache. *Choerry*. “That is *sooooo* cute!”

“Kill yourself,” Hyejoo mutters under her breath.

“I love you too Hyejoo!”

“It’s *Olivia*. ” Hyejoo glares at her with flared nostrils. “How many times do I have to tell you it’s Olivia.”

“Oh my God I’m sorry, I love you too Olivia!”

Hyejoo sinks back into her seat, massaging her temples in suffering. *Choerry* cheerfully resumes her drawing. The excessively bright colors on her paper catch Hyejoo’s eye.

Choerry’s ‘self-portrait,’ if you could even call it that, was definitely... different. Most of the page was taken up by a giant misshapen circle that Hyejoo assumed was her head. Purple crayon streaks shot out sporadically from its top, making for a very outrageous hairdo. Somehow, she still managed to make the lips even bigger than the head. Below it, there wasn’t even a body, but instead a small outline of what Hyejoo can barely make out to be as a poorly drawn limousine. She filled the tiny remaining spaces of the paper with dozens of hearts.

Choerry catches Hyejoo staring in confusion and laughs. “I know what you’re thinking, I don’t look this good. YET. But she didn’t say it needed to be current.”

“That’s definitely not what I was thinking.”

“What were you thinking?”

“If Principal Haseul drew with her foot, this would probably be the result.”

“Aww, thank you!” *Choerry* smiles widely, and continues adding finishing touches to her masterpiece.

“Anytime.” Hyejoo says sarcastically.

At the front of the room, Yeojin and her seat partner Yeri are in a similar predicament. “Yeojin, isn’t this a self-portrait assignment? That’s Lil Wayne.” Yeri had paused her music in order to give

her full attention to the drawing in front of them, which is indeed Lil Wayne, growling and flashing his grill.

“Yeri. This is who I am. This is practically my reflection.” Yejin continues carefully coloring in Lil Wayne’s face tattoos.

Just then, the entire class begins to quiet without any instruction from Vivi. Yejin looks up to identify the stimulus, and snickers knowingly at Principal Haseul knocking softly on the door.

Vivi looks up to the door, and a ten-thousand watt smile lights up her face.

The principal tip-toes to the teacher’s desk at the front of the class, moving her arms around for absolutely no reason at all. Well, if you don’t count wanting to make Vivi laugh as a reason. Otherwise... Haseul does a lot of things for a reason.

“Hi,” Haseul whispers with a shy smile, leaning and resting her palms on the edge of her co-worker’s desk.

“Hi,” Vivi giggles. “Why are we whispering?”

“I don’t know,” Haseul replies, not at all increasing her volume. Now they’re both giggling, and Yejin’s eyes have rolled to the back of her head.

“I could fucking barf,” she whispers to Yeri, who is too occupied with putting on a lip sync performance to NASA by Ariana Grande and bouncing out of her seat. But she sees Yejin lean over, and she takes the airpod out of her left ear.

“What?” she asks, while their principal asks the art teacher about her day so far. Yejin repeats her words, and Yeri furrows her eyebrows with an alarmed and disgusted look. “You’re homophobic?”

“I’m hagphobic. There’s a difference.”

Haseul notices Vivi’s drawing on the desk, and does a little gasp. “You *drew* that?” The self-portrait is, unlike anyone else’s in the room, virtually a complete lookalike. “That’s amazing!” Vivi looks back at her in disbelief, but her heart warms at the fact that if Haseul was in a comic she’d have stars in her eyes. “This is practically professional!”

(Haseul doesn’t know it, but the praise makes Vivi’s day.)

“You are so talented. But we been knew.”

“What?” Vivi laughs at Haseul’s broken grammar. “What did you say?”

“I’m trying to pick up on more tween lingo. And integrate it into my vernacular. You should see my chart.” Haseul is entirely serious, and the art teacher is eating it up while some of her students watch the homosexually-charged exchange. “Anyways, are you going to that meeting tonight?”

“PTA?” Vivi nods, tucking some of her red hair behind her ear so gracefully that Haseul silently swoons. “Yeah. As a parent tonight.” She smiles at Chaewon, who is drawing attentively. What she doesn’t see is Chaewon completely losing sight of the project, drawing herself on stage performing with 20 other superstar rappers.

“Well... I guess I’ll see you tonight then! Over some bon bon baguettes,” Haseul says awkwardly, and Vivi can’t tell whether or not the principal knows that Olive Garden isn’t French cuisine. She laughs though, like always whenever they’re together.

“I’ll see you tonight,” the teacher whispers. Haseul smiles excitedly at her in response, then turns on her heel to walk out of the artfully decorated classroom.

Just when she’s about to walk through the door though, she feels a faint hit on her back. On the floor at her feet is a crumpled paper ball, which she picks up to unravel.

‘MADE YOU LOOK’ it says, in her daughter’s chicken scratch handwriting.

She turns around and walks over to Yeojin’s desk. “Did you need something, sweetie?”

“When’s the wedding, Bertha?”

Haseul loves her pisshat daughter, but hates the blushing that erupts on her face. “*Yejin* we are not - It’s not like that.”

“That’s exactly what OJ said and you know what? It was like that,” Yeojin hisses, while Yeri bobs her head passionately with closed eyes to Vroom Vroom by Charli XCX.

“*Goodbye*,” the principal says, retreating to the door in fear of being exposed. Yeojin returns to coloring her self-portrait.

Haseul exits and walks down the long baby blue hallway, smiling blissfully to herself while she swings her lanyard around. She’s just happy to have seen Vivi, to have made her laugh. And any conversation, especially one in which the woman she’s in love with doesn’t mention her longtime boyfriend, is a total win.

Hyejoo heads down the floor lit spiral staircase just in time to catch her mother on her way out the front door.

Correction, her mothers. Hyejoo had to do a double-take to make sure she was truly looking at her other mom this early in the evening.

“Hi sweetie!” Jiwoo walks over with a smile to pinch Hyejoo’s cheek, and Hyejoo hastily bats her hand away.

“Where are you guys going?”

“The PTA meeting!” Jiwoo lets out a cheerful squeak. Sooyoung, on the other hand, looks like she is two seconds away from downing a cyanide pill.

Hyejoo looks between the two of them in both confusion and disbelief. “*Both* of you?”

“Yes! Now we have to get going... Don’t want to be late!” Jiwoo says, and pulls Sooyoung’s hand towards the door. “Oh, and obviously you’re not here by yourself - Hyunjin is here.”

Oh no. Hyejoo closes her eyes in pain. “HYEJOO LET’S PLAY SOMETHING ON YOUR GAME THINGY.” Sure enough, her babysitter Hyunjin is screaming when they are only five feet apart, and Sooyoung and Hyejoo both wince at the loud voice. “HYEJOO I’M OVER HERE. CAN YOU SEE ME?” The eighth grader continues to ignore her, not looking in her direction.

“Please take me with you.” Hyejoo looks up at her mothers in immense desperation. “Please. Do not leave me here with her.”

Sooyoung looks at her wife, concerned, but Jiwoo just giggles. “Don’t be dramatic! We’ll be back

in a few, HYUNJIN WE'LL BE BACK IN A FEW."

"OKAY!"

Hyejoo's eyes widen in panic, but before she could get out a verbal protest her mothers had already exited the house and closed the large door behind them.

As the wives stride past the elegant fountain and flower bed in front of their estate and approach the parked car, Sooyoung can't help but feel unsure if she should've left her child behind.

"Sweetie... are you sure she's an okay babysitter? Also why were you guys screaming, you were really close to each other."

"Hyunjin's lovely! And I don't know, she just likes to yell and I yell back because it's really refreshing you know? Keeps me young."

And with that, the lesbian billionaires enter their Mercedes to bypass their property's massive protective barrier of evergreen, Olive Garden bound.

The sky has long since blackened, but the center screen of flawless white Jinsol's Tesla Roadster lights up brightly while the ringtone for Jungeun ('My Humps' by The Black Eyed Peas) blares through the car speakers.

Jinsol happily lets it play for longer than it has to. Eventually, she forces herself to pick up. "Heeey!"

"Hi my love," Jungeun greets. "You let the ringtone play didn't you?"

"I may have," Jinsol says, smiling shamelessly at the road. "What's up? I'm on my way home."

"Pick me up when you get here. I made us a reservation at Olive Garden." Jungeun bites her lip on the other end of the line, hoping to God that her wife, who has never gotten anything but straight A's in her life, isn't smart enough to pick up on her lie tonight.

"Olive Garden does reservations now?" Jinsol narrows her eyes in confusion. They've never let her make one over the phone the many times she's tried (mostly for herself and herself alone).

"...Yes. Just let me know when you're outside, okay babe?"

"Okay honey," Jinsol says with an oblivious smile. "Can you tell me about your day? I missed you so much."

"It's going well so far," Jungeun hums with a smile, hiding her quiet trepidation for the night to come. It's about to get a whole lot more chaotic.

"Hi! Welcome to Olive Garden!" a black-clad employee greets upon Jinsol and Jungeun walking towards the podium.

"Hi, we have a reservation for Kim?"

The woman looks at Jinsol quizzically. "I'm - sorry, we don't do reservations here..?"

The conversation is cut short by Jungeun grabbing her wife's hand and wordlessly walking past the

podium to the seating area, Jinsol being tugged behind her. As the brunette continues to walk them past most of the seated families, Jinsol has no idea what's going on (and the grip on her wrist is too tight for her to feel okay asking).

Jungeun stops at the end of the large room, in front of wooden double-doors with a plaque above them displaying the words 'PARTY ROOM.'

"Ohh, I know what you're doing." Jinsol narrows her eyes and gives her wife a giddy smile, who stops herself from opening the door.

Jungeun deadpans. "What am I doing, honey."

"You're throwing me a birthday party!"

"Your birthday... is months away."

"Oh. We're... renewing our vows? Not what I expected from you, but Olive Garden was definitely one of my top venue choices."

"Jinsol." Jungeun inhales deeply. "Just promise me you won't leave."

Jinsol looks into her beautiful wife's eyes, and brings her hand to Jungeun's hip over her blazer. "I'd never leave you."

Jungeun's heart warms at the touch... until she pictures Sooyoung Ha seething and glaring at Jinsol as they enter. *We'll see*, she thinks, and without another word, she pulls open the door.

The private room is almost completely filled with guests... women... *moms*, and as the door loudly creaks shut behind them, all their eyes are on them. At their round tables, Jinsol sees some of the women gasp and whisper interestedly to their seatmates. Puzzled, the blonde looks left to the front of the room, and sees the following words projected in bold on the screen:

WELCOME TO ST. JIHYO'S PRESIDENTIAL ACADEMY'S

1 st ANNUAL PTA MEETING

Jinsol is frozen in place. "Wh-"

"Hi! Welcome!" An unfamiliar black-haired woman walks away from the display MacBook to approach the couple and shake their hands. Her smile is sophisticated and warm, but her eyes radiate intimidation. "I'm Irene Kang, the PTA President." In her fashionable yet very professional fit with a blazer, skirt, and heels, she looks more like a United States politician and less one of a private school.

"Hi Irene, I'm Jungeun, Choerry's mom - we spoke earlier on the phone?"

"Oh yes!" Irene's eyes flash in recognition, beaming. "So nice to finally meet the moms of our fearless student body president!"

Jinsol stops. *Choerry is student body president?*

She had no idea.

Irene suddenly looks to Jinsol with eyes widening in astonishment. "Wait a minute... Then you must be Dr. Jinsol Kim?"

“Haha, yes, that’s me!” Jinsol laughs nervously, still quite uncomfortable in the new situation that she did not, in any way, ask to be in.

“Wow! I’ve never seen you in person before!” Irene looks the woman up and down, as if she’s trying to figure out how to speak to her. Making up her mind she smiles gently. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for St. Jihyo’s.” Irene continues to thank her profusely, while Jinsol humbly tells her it’s nothing, truly, anything for the kids. “You two can sit anywhere you’d like. The meeting is going to start in a few. So nice to finally meet you.” She gives them one more sincere smile before returning to the front.

Jungeun and Jinsol scan the room of round tables for four, and decide on one in the front row adjacent to the window where no one is currently sitting.

“Why are we here,” Jinsol whispers. Neither have them have ever attended a PTA meeting, have never even spoken about doing so outside of jokes. But Jungeun stays mute as they slide into their seats. Jinsol’s eyes light up at the coming waiter’s full basket of breadsticks, and snatches one as soon as it hits the tabletop.

Just then, an overbright glare from outside the window beside her makes the oceanographer squint and shield her face.

Jinsol’s blood runs cold as she watches the black Mercedes Benz with tinted windows slowly and perfectly pull into a parking space.

She’d forgotten about Satan.

Chapter End Notes

Oop, a cliffhanger... Part 2 is coming sooner than you think... Stay tuned and do tell us your favorite parts in the comments below!

First PTA Meeting (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

hey skinnies, daniela here, just wanted to say im really glad y'all have liked this fic so far and i'm really excited for you guys to see where this story goes!!!! :D without further ADO here's part 2 oh shit that rhymed gowon shaking

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“We’re leaving,” the blonde CEO abruptly chokes out. “We’re leaving right now,” Jinsol says, shoving breadsticks into her purse.

“Hey, hey,” Jungeun grabs her wife’s hand to stop her, and she can’t help but feel the impending doom as well. But for Choerry’s sake, she’s going to force her through it. “Jinsol.” Her wife stops. “You said you wouldn’t leave.”

Jinsol’s fear skyrockets as she sees the gleaming Mercedes doors slowly open upward. “This is *different*,” she pleads, with the urgency of escaping a ticking time bomb.

“Baby. We’re staying right here.”

Jinsol manages to stay put, but it doesn’t stop the urge she gets to throw herself off a bridge when she sees Sooyoung in her long dark trench coat step out of the car. She links arms with Jiwoo, and they smile at each other sweetly before walking towards the entrance of the restaurant.

“As the Romans once said, ‘Well it’s over.’”

“Sol.” The blonde is anxiously and aggressively bouncing her leg under the table, head turning to stare at the door. “Remember when...” Jungeun racks her brain for something, any anecdote to calm her down “When we were outside my mom’s house? To tell her that we were engaged?”

Jinsol pauses and looks back at Jungeun, distracted and comforted by her thumb rubbing circles on the back of her palm. She nods with a tiny gulp.

“I couldn’t even ring the doorbell. Remember? She hadn’t spoken to me in more than a year.”

“You were walking away. Back to the car,” Jinsol recalls, softening her expression.

“Yes. But remember what you said to me? To get me to stay?” Jungeun asks, smiling at the way Jinsol is loosening as she illustrates the memory, her hand relaxing in Jungeun’s own.

“...I said,” Jinsol stifles a laugh. “Oh gosh, what did I say again,”

“You said... ‘Nothing is impossible unless you can’t do it.’”

Jinsol chuckles at her own stupidity. “That’s the one.” And just like that, a room filled to capacity with mothers feels as though they’re the only two in it.

“You told me that stupid fucking quote,” Jungeun explains playfully, “And it made absolutely no sense, but it got me through that dinner. So if I could take my mother, you can handle a grown

woman who has a secret Instagram for posting work-out sayings.”

It takes a few moments for the connection to be made in Jinsol’s brain. Then, she’s choking from trying to gasp and laugh at the same time. “She *what?*”

“Yes. She posts aggressively douchey things like ‘You don’t get the ass you want by sitting on it.’” The CEO giggles lowly at the new embarrassing information. “Jiwoo showed me.” (Jungeun is pretty sure Jiwoo wasn’t supposed to show anyone in the first place.)

Irene calls out that the meeting is about to begin, and Jungeun, with a warm smile, mouths to her *It’s gonna be fine*. Jinsol takes one last look of adoration at her beautiful wife, squeezes her hand, and looks to the front of the room as the lights begin to dim.

Jinsol takes a deep breath, and tries to concentrate on Irene’s welcome speech to the parents. She’s doing fine, until she hears Jiwoo’s familiar voice break through the double doors. “*HELLO?!?*”

Irene stops mid-sentence, silencing the room. Quietly, she mutters “The doors are open... I don’t know what-” Jiwoo must have figured it out, because suddenly she’s walking inside, Sooyoung in hand.

Both of Irene’s eyebrows shoot up when she sees that the baking superstar isn’t alone. Everyone is now looking at them, except Jinsol, who tries to find some joy in the odd wall decor.

Jiwoo’s mouth forms an “O” shape at the standstill she’s caused, and kindly whispers “Sorry to interrupt, everyone!” Irene is still silent, staring in shock and confusion. So is the rest of the room. “Oh, this is Sooyoung!”

Irene looks around, quickly recovering from losing control of the room. “Everyone, this is Sooyoung Ha, president and CEO of Yves Saint Laurent, and our most generous donor!” Mothers everywhere burst into vigorous, enthusiastic applause. Some even stand up.

Irene checks her watch, slightly flustered at the time going by and begins to tap her foot impatiently. She has a big presentation to give in a narrow time window, after all.

Sooyoung smiles and waves politely at the grand welcome, while Jinsol mutters a little too loudly “I didn’t get a standing ovation” and gets kicked harshly under the table by Jungeun.

A very disconcerted Irene waits a beat, leans back over to the Has, and whispers, “Thanks for finally joining us. Sit where you’d like, but since you’re late there won’t be anything close. I’m sure you’ll find somewhere though.” She offers a tight lipped smile and Sooyoung returns it.

“Well she’s a treat.” Sooyoung whispers to Jiwoo quietly, as Irene turns back to her slideshow.

Jiwoo chuckles. “Oh don’t worry about it, it’s just because we’re late. Irene is just a very... precise person.” The celebrity smiles. “She and her wife are very nice, I promise.”

The tall, refined CEO takes her wife’s hand and scans the room for empty seats. Before Jinsol can tear her eyes away from them after stealing a peek, Sooyoung and her, for the first time in years, *make eye contact*.

Sooyoung looks away as quickly as one would retract their hand from a burning hot surface.

But much to Yves Saint Laurent’s CEO’s dismay... the only seats left are the two vacant spots remaining at Jinsol’s table.

Hesitantly, Sooyoung takes Jiwoo and approaches their table while Irene continues talking to the crowd. Jiwoo flashes Jungeun an absolutely manic smile... and that's when Jungeun knew that this ship is about to go down. "Jungie!" her best friend greets happily. Jungeun stands to embrace Jiwoo, who then goes to hug Jinsol before taking her seat.

Sooyoung completely ignores Jinsol at first. "Hi Jungeun," she whispers, and leans over to tightly embrace her old friend. And Jinsol's nails, despite their short length, pierce the tablecloth.

"Hello, Jinsol." The greeting comes out airy and harmless-sounding, yet Jinsol knows that Sooyoung's honeyed voice drips with poison.

"Hello Sooyoung." The other CEO says dryly (after swallowing a bolus of her intimidation), cocking her head to the side and forcing a tight-lipped smile. They don't hug.

The taller woman is barely sitting down, but has already decided to begin her assault. She looks Jinsol dead in the eyes, and perks her eyebrows up innocently with a smirk. "You've eaten all the breadsticks already, Jinsol?"

"Yes I like to have a healthy intake of carbohydrates Sooyoung, is there a problem?" Jinsol retorts. Jungeun, closing her eyes, brings her fingers to the bridge of her nose. Jiwoo playfully stirs her drink with her straw as her eyes dart between the two. Jungeun takes out her phone under the table.

Jungeun: You just wanted to stir the pot didn't you

Jiwoo: i can bring my pots in here? :D

Jungeun: Jiwoo.

Jiwoo: OHHHH i get what you mean! stir the pot

Jungeun: Yes.

Jiwoo: you brought dank?

Jungeun: What...?

Jiwoo: dank

Jiwoo: do i just use one of their spoons ?

Jiwoo: i dont think youre supposed to stir weed although i think i heard a high schooler talking about grinding is that what you mean ?

Jungeun locks her phone.

"Tonight," Irene declares as her powerpoint smoothly transitions to a very aesthetically pleasing slide, "We'll be going over all of this year's 8th grade events that the PTA is in charge of facilitating.

"First, we have the Aquarium of the Pacific field trip." A vibrant blue slide flashes across the projector, with a high quality ocean's surface gif seamlessly looping as the background.

Principal Haseul Jo turns to Ms. Vivi Wong at her side in the darkness, and whispers "This is an abnormally nice powerpoint for a PTA meeting."

Irene's wife, Seulgi Kang, turns in her chair to face Haseul. "She's been working on this for months."

"Damn ma, is it that serious?"

"What?" Seulgi and Vivi ask in unison, staring at the principal in utter confusion.

"The kids like to say that too," Haseul adds quietly, in her normal voice.

Large white text materializes on the screen as Irene clicks the pointer once more. "The Aquarium of the Pacific field trip is an annual tradition for the 8th grade class, and every year the class gets free VIP passes thanks to one of our very own Saint mothers... Who is also the aquarium's president & CEO!" Irene looks over to the Kim and Ha table with a gracious smile at Jinsol. "Dr. Jinsol Kim is here with us tonight for the very first time as well! You might recognize her from the news as the billionaire who bought SeaWorld just to shut it down."

The room bursts into lively applause once more, and Jinsol nods and waves politely, internally doing backflips at the hard-earned praise. Sooyoung sits expressionless and claps a grand total of twice before folding her hands back in her lap.

"Because of the free passes that we have thanks to Dr. Kim, we won't require as much fundraising to cover the expenses of that event. But we will for our next one... which is..." The next slide spins into center view. "Field Day!"

Waiters have started making their way around the tables to quietly take orders from the parents. Jiwoo, Jungeun, Jinsol, and Sooyoung all successfully report their food choices, but before their waiter leaves, Sooyoung taps his shoulder.

"Could you also bring us some more breadsticks? Oh- and some garlic bread too please. Gotta make sure we have our healthy intake of carbohydrates. Right Jinsol?"

She turns to the blonde, smug as ever, and Jinsol returns a forced smile while her fork visibly begins to bend in her hand.

"Field Day," Irene continues, "Is the students' favorite day of the year."

"Mine too." Haseul whispers to Vivi. "I love the water balloon fight."

Vivi tilts her head. "The kids have a water balloon fight?"

"Well it's more like I fill up water balloons by myself and throw them at people. Also I've never done it before. But I'm going to do it this year and I'm very excited about it." Haseul declares with a proud smile. "Irene doesn't know so don't tell her," she adds hastily.

Vivi moves her hand across her mouth to motion zipping it. Haseul smiles, and turns back to the presentation. Vivi watches Haseul for a lingering second, and chuckles quietly before doing the same.

"Of course then we have our Bake Sale on Candy Cane Lane for the Christmas season. This is our biggest fundraiser of the year, so you all better start getting your recipes ready now!" Irene uses a playful voice, but it's obvious that she may as well have a gun to everyone's head.

"Next, we have the annual archdiocese-wide Dinner & Spoken Word competition, where students get to showcase their skills in slam poetry! For the first time in 10 years, St. Jihyo's will be hosting!"

Jinsol reaches for the basket of garlic bread and the center of the table, and is met with resistance - her best friend Sooyoung, too, is pulling at the basket.

Neither of them let go.

The two CEOs tug the basket of garlic bread at the same time, with increasing force as Jinsol's hand begins to shake from the sheer strength of her grip.

"Are you serious?" Jungeun asks in disbelief, as Jinsol and Sooyoung glare at each other with contempt.

Jiwoo loves a good catfight, but this is getting too childish (even for her). She gently places a hand on her wife's arm. "Honey, let go." She doesn't budge. "*Sooyoung*," Jiwoo says, voice turning steely. "Let go, or I'm watching the next episode of the Kardashians without you," she threatens through gritted teeth.

Sooyoung gasps. "You wouldn't," she whispers, simply appalled by the treacherous threat. But before Sooyoung can let go, Jinsol suddenly opens her hold, and all the garlic bread in the basket comes flying to Sooyoung's face.

"Oops!"

Sooyoung is zero seconds away from launching out of her seat to grab Jinsol by the hair to throw her across the room like Thor's hammer when Irene loudly clears her throat. She stares at their table, prompting everyone else in the room to do so too. Jiwoo whispers a "Sorry!" and Jungeun has her head in her hands.

"Shortly after is the Spring Fling dance, which will be our most expensive event by far. We will need a venue, catering, a DJ, and so much more; we can anticipate the event to cost around \$10,000. Which, of course, is why the Christmas bake sale is so important."

"I could just donate that money, it's not a problem." Sooyoung offers from her seat (after brushing all the bread crumbs off of herself) and starts to pull out her checkbook from her purse.

Jinsol quickly pulls hers out as well. "Yeah it's no problem, I can also donate that much. I can donate more even." Jinsol starts scribbling random numbers one after the other on a blank check.

Sooyoung lets out a hard chuckle. "I mean I can buy the entire venue, if that's what the school needs."

Jinsol narrows her eyes. "I'm sure you could. Why don't you buy the school while you're at it, maybe you want my purse too? Do you want to buy that?"

Sooyoung looks at Jinsol's purse with disgust. "Trust me. *No one* wants to buy that."

"Oh my God, *SHUT UP!*" Both women look up at Irene who has just screamed at them from the front of the room.

Irene awkwardly clears her throat again, and adjusts her blazer. "Umm... the cap on monetary donations to the PTA is \$8,000, which you've both already generously given, and will be distributed to other events throughout the year. But we still need to raise funds for the dance. And you two can help out in other ways... like chaperoning." Both sitting women put away their checkbooks and sit in silence. Exasperated, Irene continues.

"Right before graduation is the field trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Kids get in

free, so we'll just have to fundraise for transportation. We won't be doing Paint For Change this year though... due to... the vandalism," Irene awkwardly laments.

"OOF!"

All eyes are on Haseul, who just needed to open her mouth.

"Would you like to add something, Princip-"

"No! Carry on!" Haseul grins, then looks around nervously. She hopes no one remembers it was her own daughter, who tricked an entire class into painting a mosaic mural of Drake's face onto the freeway-facing wall of Children's Hospital Los Angeles.

Sooyoung perks her head up to her tablemates. "Vandalism? You wouldn't know anything about that, would you Jinsol?"

"Why would I know anything about that." Jinsol replies, flatly.

"Oh, since you dabble in it I assumed you'd have an idea." Sooyoung says, staring at Jinsol dead in the face as it reddens in shame.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jinsol hisses.

"I think you very well do," Sooyoung retaliates, no longer whispering. Irene stops talking, and dramatically clears her throat for what feels like the millionth time.

Like school children themselves, Sooyoung and Jinsol look to the PTA president, who declares a very passive aggressive "I'll wait." The CEOs, clearly embarrassed to be called out a third time, collect themselves and the meeting resumes.

"Lastly there's graduation, and the school year's over! All the excess funds are funneled into the school's summer carnival."

The parents clap and, with relief, Irene smiles at her audience. "It looks like dinner is beginning to arrive for everyone, so please enjoy your food as Seulgi goes over the mandatory safety rules for the events."

After tinkering with the computer for a few seconds, Seulgi is able to pull up a very bright and loud powerpoint. 'safety rules' is on the cover slide in Comic Sans. Unlike her wife's presentation, there seems to be no order... anywhere... and the Glee Cast version of *Safety Dance* plays in the background on a loop the entire time she speaks.

Jungeun watches the clock anxiously and is relieved that somehow, Sooyoung and Jinsol managed to keep it together through all of Seulgi's instructions.

"Lastly, we need to make sure no one gets their hands stuck in the carnival ferris wheel rotator. Almost happened to me last year and it was not fun." Seulgi clicks to the final slide, which is just a giant picture of Irene smiling in bed.

"This isn't part of the safety rules, but isn't she pretty?" Seulgi smiles up at the picture as Irene quickly rushes up to shut off the projector, cheeks beet red.

"Okay everyone, thank you so much for coming!" She gently nudges Seulgi off the stage.

"Remember every parent group must complete at least 3 shifts of volunteer work this year - from chaperoning events to running fundraisers - and you must email me with your choices by the 24th.

First come first serve. Thank you again, and enjoy the rest of your meals!” Irene takes a deep breath and finally sits down at her table.

“Dope presentation Renie!” Haseul offers a fist bump and Irene looks at it in distaste.

“Yeah it was!” Seulgi smiles warmly at her wife. Softening, Irene rolls her eyes and fist bumps Haseul back.

“Well that was informative!” Jiwoo perks up from her chair. “To be honest I kind of blacked out until that safety song started playing. I asked Siri to save it for me.” Jiwoo chuckles and stabs her fork into her lasagna.

Jungeun looks back and forth between her wife and Sooyoung. *Well, it could've been worse?* She takes a large sip of her water as Jiwoo continues talking about how enjoyable Seulgi's powerpoint was.

The group continues to eat as Jiwoo babbles on, and Jungeun watches as Jinsol relentlessly slurps up spaghetti noodles. Sooyoung is also staring at her, moderately repulsed at her eating habits. However, as she remains silent, Jungeun thinks they might just make it out in one piece.

That is, until a smug smile begins to creep across Sooyoung's face.

“Jinsol, are you saving spaghetti for later? We can get you a container, you don't have to keep it around your mouth.”

Jinsol's eyebrows move down to form a ‘V’ shape and she stands suddenly. “That's so generous of you Sooyoung, maybe you'd like a container as well. Like a coffin possibly?”

“Ohhhhhh- kay!” Jungeun stands with her wife, latching onto her arm fearfully. “Well it's getting late, we should really get going!”

Jiwoo looks at her Apple watch and stands as well. “Oh we should too, we have to let the babysitter go home.” Jiwoo motions for Sooyoung to stand as well.

Gathering their things, both couples begin to make their way out of the Olive Garden party room with the other St. Jihyo's PTA parents.

Behind the restaurant in the dimly lit parking lot, the Kims watch from the corner of the building as the Has retreat to their vehicle.

Well, Jungeun watches. Jinsol is glaring, and has been doing so ever since she exchanged half-hearted goodbyes with Sooyoung.

Jungeun turns back to her wife to see her still staring at the Mercedes with a fist clenched at her side like the Arthur meme. She rolls her eyes. “Can you please just relax?”

“I can't stand her. I hate her sauntering, her arrog-”

The blonde is interrupted by the deafening roar of Sooyoung revving her car engine for absolutely no reason other than to show off. Jinsol is infuriated.

“She doesn't need to have her dick out like that,” she spits.

Jungeun lets out a spent sigh, one much more exhausted than usual. Taking Jinsol to the PTA

meeting was tiring and problematic, just like she anticipated it would be. She just wants to go home.

“I *despise* her. I don’t even know why you brought me here tonight-”

“Because you’ve been ignoring our daughter.”

The words take a beat to register in Jinsol’s brain, and she turns to her wife slowly, utterly taken aback. Her eyes soften. “What?” The CEO’s question comes not from a place of defensiveness, but one of complete confusion.

“Jinsol...” Jungeun is careful with her word choice, careful with how she treads this icy new ground. “You don’t even talk to her anymore.” And so, Jungeun tells her - about the permission slip, about how that isn’t even the first time she’s heard something similar from Choerry.

The more evidence Jungeun supplies, the more it dawns upon oblivious Jinsol that the accusation is not merely an impulsive remark but the actual truth of her actions - and the clearer it becomes that she’s truly left her relationship with her daughter to decay from malnourishment. And under the pressure of her heavy guilt, her heart starts to crack.

Lips slightly parted and hurt in her eyes, Jinsol looks like a kicked puppy. She tries to focus on anything, anything *but* Jungeun’s words, from the blinding cores of the streetlamps to the cars that whiz past the stoplight.

And Jungeun doesn’t want to add it when she sees the look on Jinsol’s face, but she has to - gently, she has to - “Our daughter is hurting, Sol.”

As nonsensical as it sounds in retrospect, Jinsol never thought Choerry would seriously be affected her absence. But how could she *not* be, when the CEO retraces her steps to recognize she’s been increasingly busy for months, hell, *years* even?

The thought of Choerry hurting because she’s been an absentee mother, so chronically that Jungeun had to tell her herself, makes her feel like she’s completely and utterly failed.

“Jinsol, please don’t cry...” Jungeun sees the tears begin to take form at the corners of Jinsol’s eyes, and the blonde looks away again pursing her lips hard so the tears won’t fall.

“I’m sorry,” she says, shakily. The sentiment is barely audible, but she means it with her whole heart. “I’m really sorry, Jungeun,” she chokes out, biting her lip and lowering her head, not wanting the world to bear witness to her crumbling.

“The time just flew by so fast and-” Jinsol shakes her head, looking up to the sky with glassy eyes. “God, I am *such* a bad mom,” she says, voiceless.

“No,” Jungeun immediately rejects, walking closer to her wife. “Hey... look at me, please,” she hates that had to be the one to do this; Jinsol is so sensitive, and it doesn’t help that every time she cries Jungeun has to talk herself out of doing so too. “Hey...” she whispers.

“You’re not a bad mom.” Jungeun continues. She moves her hands to clasp firmly around Jinsol’s, and looks up at all the sadness in Jinsol’s eyes. “But you have to do better with her, okay?” The blonde’s tears flow freely, and she hates herself even more for crying behind an Olive Garden but man does it hurt to think of how bad she’s royally fucked up.

She sobs, noiselessly, and Jungeun brings her into her arms. ‘I didn’t know’ is all Jungeun can make out from the whimpers into her shoulder. She strokes her hair comfortingly, and fights the

prickling in her own eyes with deep, slow breaths. “Now you do,” she whispers by her wife’s ear.

It stuns her, the way her wife appears to have genuinely had no idea at all. Despite the sadness of the situation though, it’s almost comedic how she’s been missing the blatantly obvious for this long. *Only Jinsol*, Jungeun muses quietly, as she gently runs her fingers through blonde hair.

She apologizes once more when she finally pulls away.

“Sol, you can make it up to her. It’s not too late.”

Jinsol may have needed a wake up call, but deep down she’s known that above all else, her family is her world. Not the aquarium, not the accolades, not anything else - and the possibility that one of her moons is slipping away is not something she takes lightly.

“Thank you for letting me know,” Jinsol says.

(Jungeun will always tell it to her straight. It’s part of the reason why she loves her so much.)

The brunette goes on her tippy toes to plant a soft kiss on Jinsol’s forehead. “Now come on, let’s go home.”

Together, they walk hand in hand to their car - and Jinsol is determined to never take what she has for granted again.

Jungeun is sorting through paperwork in her penthouse office the next morning when her phone buzzes on her desk.

Jinsol: Taking some time off after this week x

Her heart blooms.

Jungeun: I love you.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: The 8th graders of St. Jihyo’s go on the Aquarium of the Pacific field trip! Buckle your seatbelts! And be sure to tell us your favorite parts, characters, relationships, favorite anything that evoked emotion in this chapter... TELL US in the comments below! We love you! :) - Cat

Hunger

Chapter Notes

hey guys im gonna THROW UP here's chapter 4 if the us women don't win today i'll be passing away tomorrow thank you have fun reading - daniela

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

For a private school with a multi-million dollar endowment, they could do with some better ventilation, Choerry thinks to herself upon entering the stuffy middle school cafeteria, which reeks of pungent scents from both pre-teens and their lunches.

The purple-haired eighth grader walks down the center aisle, scanning the long rectangular tables to her left and right for her friend group. And there they sit, at their new territory by the largest window. Bright colored Choerry catches her best friend Nayeon's attention, who beckons her to join them.

Choerry sets her school boxed lunch down at their table, and squeezes into a seat between the window and her boyfriend Chad - captain of both the football and basketball team. "Hey baby," he greets halfheartedly, eyes glued to his Instagram feed in front of him. Choerry is pretty sure he just got off practice considering the B.O. she could smell wafting through the air.

"Hi," Choerry replies in her sweet voice regardless, planting a kiss on his cheek.

Nayeon, Jeongyeon, and Dahyun sit across from them. "Hello Madam President," Nayeon says with a toothless smile.

"Hello Madam Vice President," Choerry greets and tilts her head affectionately, excitement filling her once again when she remembers she will be spending eighth grade running the school with her best friend.

"Shut up whores, I need to start a new Tik Tok." Dahyun spits, and positions her camera in front of her and begins to pose ridiculously. She flicks her phone camera hard and winks with a dab.

"What the fuck are you doing." Jeongyeon criticizes with narrowed eyes.

"I HAVE FIVE MILLION FOLLOWERS JEONGYEON," Dahyun practically screams, "What do you have?"

"Dignity." Jeongyeon rolls her eyes, and slaps the phone out of Dahyun's hand, sending her fumbling to the floor after it.

Choerry opens her boxed lunch to see yet again another impressive assortment. Waiting patiently to be consumed are half a sandwich, a cup of actually-good mashed potatoes, a small orange juice bottle, a cookie, and some apple slices. "Wow, they're really stepping it up this year!"

"If you can even call that food." Dahyun adds, restarting her Tik Tok after recovering her phone from the floor.

"I think it's alright," Choerry shrugs. (Choerry doesn't know it, but parts of Jinsol's massive

donations were specifically for better lunches for the kids.)

"I guess." Dahyun's music blares loudly while she proceeds to lip sync the wrong words. But she's interrupted by a violent *SPLAT* on the window next to them, coming from outside. As a smashed, gooey cup of mashed potatoes slowly sinks down the window, Choerry spots Yeojin cackling from a table outside in the patio area, laughing along with who Choerry thinks she can recognize through the mash as Hyejoo from art (or, sorry, Olivia), Ms. Wong's daughter, and another girl laughing almost as hard as Yeojin.

"Those lesbian gremlins are so obnoxious," Nayeon says, disgusted.

Dahyun chortles. "What about the *lesbian* sitting right next to us? You seem to get along with her just fine," she says, referring to the short-haired girl next to them.

"Shut up Jacob Sartorius," Jeongyeon snaps.

Chad looks up from his phone, intrigued. "Are you..." He lowers his voice, appearing almost afraid to say what's next. "...Antihomo?"

"It's homophobic you overgrown potato, and no, I'm not, they're just fucking annoying," Nayeon clarifies, exasperated. "I don't know why we keep *sitting* by the *window*."

"Because Chowry likes it," Jeongyeon remarks.

"It's Choerry," Choerry says.

"No thanks."

Jeongyeon turns to see Dahyun using her phone again, and decides to use her entire palm to push Dahyun's face backwards.

"Oh my GOD." Dahyun fumes under her hand, having to restart her Tik Tok in rage.

Choerry gives up, and silences - and the only sound nearby is Chad viciously smacking away at his food. Correction, Choerry's food. His unwashed, visibly dirty hands have reached into her box to snatch both her cookie and her entire sandwich, which he now chews with an open mouth.

"Choerry can you please turn off your garbage disposal?" Jeongyeon requests, glaring at Chad, but still managing to poke Dahyun with a fork on the opposite side of her.

Choerry lightly taps her boyfriend, who before she can say anything, finishes the rest of her sandwich and stands up. "I'm gonna go play with the boys now," he declares. He leans over to Choerry to kiss her on the lips, but she can smell his body odor again and she pushes him away.

"C'mon, please," he persists.

"No," Choerry says.

"*Argh!*" he flares, and mumbles an irritated *Whatever* before grabbing his backpack from under the bench and storming off.

Choerry looks down into her box. *The things you do for love*, she thinks, with a little laugh. "He ate all my lunch," she says, reaching to unscrew her juice.

"It's okay, you could lose some weight anyways."

The comment comes from Nayeon, and Jeongyeon and Dahyun are too busy wrestling over

Dahyun's phone to hear.

Choerry looks up at her in complete shock.

Every other noise in the cafeteria begins to sound like she's hearing them underwater.

Choerry feels her heart beating fearfully in her chest, and opens her mouth to reply, but Nayeon simply advances the conversation as easily as she brought it to a standstill, without any further comment on the matter.

The purple-haired girl just tunes it out, and, hating herself, quietly returns the juice, suddenly having lost all of her appetite.

"I'M SO FUCKING SICK OF YOUR ASS!" Jeongyeon screams, holding Dahyun's phone away from her and bringing Choerry back down to Earth.

"MAYBE IF YOU FOLLOWED MY TIK TOK YOU'D UNDERSTAND THE ART!" Dahyun yells into her ear. Jeongyeon hurls Dahyun's phone across the room, not caring who it may hit, and Dahyun scrambles off of her to run after it like a feral dog.

Jeongyeon sighs, and carefully unwraps her own lunch from home. Nayeon breathes out a series of laughs as Jeongyeon reveals it to be a whole cooked lobster.

"Who brings a lobster to school?" Nayeon chuckles out, and Choerry stops. That reminds her- "Speaking of sea animals," she adds with a hint of disgust, "The aquarium field trip tomorrow..." She points a finger towards her open mouth and gags. "Boring."

With the little fire the normally jovial student body president can muster within herself, she won't let her get away with this one. "My mom *owns it*," Choerry snaps with narrowed eyes.

Choerry swears she can see fear in Nayeon's eyes for a quick two seconds before her facial expression has a complete makeover. With a big smile and almost convincing excitement had Choerry not heard in her remark before, she says "Well I didn't know that! Choerry this is going to be so much fun!"

Nayeon and Jeongyeon continue to talk to each other, and Choerry zones out once again. Uninterested and definitely hurt, she looks out the window. Her attention is directed to Yeojin and company outside, laughing at their round table so hard that they are all gasping for air. Choerry can't remember the last time she laughed that much.

Maybe one day, Choerry hopes, these guys will make me that happy.

"Hyejoo!"

Later that day at the Ha residence, Jiwoo calls for her daughter ever so sweetly from the kitchen, just having finished fixing up an after-school snack.

"Hyejooooo!" The woman holds out the end of her child's name even longer than before. Still, there was no sign of Hyejoo even being alive. Jiwoo closes her eyes, and puts down the glass of water she was drinking.

"HYEJOOOOOOOOO!" Jiwoo lets out a hellish screech, scaring the living daylights out of Hyejoo who had already begun coming down the stairs.

“Jesus mom! Yes?” Hyejoo stands on the last step to the kitchen, positioning her arms so she could lean her entire body weight on the spiraling staircase’s railing.

“I made a snack for you! Here.” Jiwoo says with a smile, holding out a small bowl with Hyejoo’s favorite fruits chopped up inside. Hyejoo walks towards her, ears still ringing.

“Thanks.” Hyejoo grabs the bowl and is about to turn away when her mother reaches out.

“Hey no wait! Let’s sit! Tell me about your day.” Jiwoo points to the chair and Hyejoo pauses before reluctantly and awkwardly sitting. The celebrity puts both elbows on the kitchen island and sets her face in her hands, giving her full attention to her daughter.

“Uhhhhh. It went okay... Can I leave now?” Olivia tries to get up, but her mother, fast as lightning, shoves her back down onto the seat.

“No! You had that summer project due today right? The one you interviewed me for last week? How did that go?”

Hyejoo shifts uncomfortably in her seat, suddenly very interested in the contents of her snack bowl.

Jiwoo’s eyes narrow. “What happened? Did your teacher give you a bad grade?” Hyejoo’s eyes focus on the floor. Jiwoo crosses her arms.

“You used the notes I gave you right? And the special vlog I made for you? I gave you 5 USBs packed with videos of me talking.”

“Yeah, I told you I didn’t need that.” Hyejoo huffs slightly and flicks a piece of strawberry to the opposite side of her bowl. “That’s... not why she gave me a bad grade though.”

Jiwoo crumples her eyebrows in confusion, noticing that her daughter is clearly struggling to say something else on her mind. “Then?”

“It was supposed to be about our whole family.” Hyejoo shoves a grape into her mouth and quickly chews. “I didn’t do that.”

Jiwoo’s arms remain crossed. “And why not?”

Hyejoo swallows. “I didn’t want to... ask... Mom any questions.” she admits uncomfortably. “She’s kind of scary. Plus, she’s always busy. I really don’t know much about her anyway, other than she’s brooding and successful, and that was too short for the page requirement so I just left her out.”

Jiwoo’s facial expression softens in sadness, shoulders slumping.

Her daughter didn’t even know one of her own mothers enough to write more than a single sentence about her?

The heartbreak on her face must have been obvious, because Hyejoo immediately stands up. “Um - it’s fine Mom, it wasn’t even that bad of a grade. I’ll just do the extra credit tomorrow... it’s okay.” She eats the last strawberry in her bowl with the guilt of dampening the mood. “I’m gonna go back upstairs now.” Hyejoo gives Jiwoo an awkward hug, but before Jiwoo can even put an arm around her daughter the girl was bounding up the stairs.

Jiwoo watches her sadly, all the way until she disappears after a turn into the hallway and she can’t

see her anymore.

The chills on Sooyoung's almost bare form melt away as she slowly slips into the bubbling hot tub. With the long daylights of summer slipping away, the radiant dark azure of the water only shines brighter to illuminate her pale skin.

The water foams just below her neck. After a particularly exhausting day and walking through all of it in Louboutins, getting to unwind in the water was a luxury Sooyoung appreciated.

Her eyes focused on the sight in front of her - her grand mansion, the Beverly Hills view of the entire city just past its buildings, and the personalized comfort she's been able to create for herself, from hard work and imagination alone.

There were many luxuries to be appreciated.

Leaning her head back against the contoured platform, she stares at the black sky and her eyes began to shut.

She thinks back to a time much longer ago. Decades before she had clawed her way to the apex of the fashion industry.

Back to one afternoon of her youth that she will never forget.

Sooyoung's parents were gone, always gone, to focus on the multiple jobs they both had. She was alone in their cramped apartment, with a bowl of canned soup set aside to be her dinner. It was her responsibility to eat whatever was available without complaints. That's all she really was expected to do as her parents' child - fend for herself, and not complain.

When Sooyoung thinks back to that evening, she can't recall just how many nights in a row she'd been having canned soup, or why she was rummaging through the cabinet above her. What she does remember though is not finding whatever it is she was searching for. That, and the panic that screamed through her when she accidentally knocked the bowl of soup below her over the ledge.

All the soup from the last can in the house had splattered on the floor.

Sooyoung remembers how she fell to her knees that night, how the tears stung at her eyes, and how she could barely see the floor she was cleaning. She remembers her parents coming home, and her lying to their faces that she'd eaten, not wanting to burden them with anything more than the lives they already had to live. She remembers learning to force hunger down, yet, another hunger for deliverance had begun to manifest itself within her mind.

The CEO opens her eyes to force herself out of the harsh reality of what once was, and is hit with immense satisfaction gazing upon the towering, extravagant perfection of her home.

Everything she's tackled, she's conquered. And that's what makes it taste so good.

The sound of one of the doors opening brings Sooyoung out of her thoughts. She looks over her shoulder to see her stunning wife gently shutting the door. Jiwoo, in a short white robe, walks toward her in the low light, holding two glasses and her favorite bottle of strawberry champagne.

She sets them down on the floor behind Sooyoung's head, and leans over to kiss her wife on the cheek. "I figured you'd be here," she says, pouring a drink for Sooyoung, before walking on the platform to the opposite end of the hot tub.

Jiwoo sits on the edge to submerge her legs in the hot water. "Is everything okay honey?"

"Yes," she hums. "Just... thinking," Sooyoung says with a light sigh.

"About?" Jiwoo prods, tentatively.

Sooyoung looks across the water at Jiwoo, her sweet Jiwoo, perfect features that glow in the blue light and eyes that exude only love for her wife. "About how lucky I am."

Jiwoo smiles, blushing hard, and excited to tell her the good news she got today. "Guess what I did today."

"What?"

"I signed off to guest star on MasterChef," Jiwoo says, smiling proudly into her drink.

Sooyoung gasps. "*Jiwoo!*" she nearly shrieks in happiness, breaking from her usual airy voice. "That is amazing! I'm so proud of you-"

"Not so fast," Jiwoo says, holding up a finger at her confused wife. "I already told Irene which PTA events to put us down for, and Field Day was one of them. And I'm going to be filming that week, so you're going to volunteer."

Sooyoung tenses. "Oh gosh..." She cringes heavily with narrowed eyes. "Really?" Sooyoung is looking for a loophole out of this. "How about... we tell her we're both out of town?" she suggests.

"Sooyoung, you've seen how she is..." Jiwoo says the last part through grit teeth and a smile, as her wife remembers how Irene nearly had a brain aneurysm when the PTA meeting was two minutes behind schedule. "And you're going to do it for Hyejoo! Because she's scared of you."

Sooyoung knits her brows in confusion. "She's what?"

"She's scared of you. She had a summer project about her parents and was too scared to ask you anything," Jiwoo says seriously. "So now I'm putting my foot down. You're going to be there."

Sooyoung, for Jiwoo's sake, entertains the possibility of going to her daughter's school and engaging in PTA. Standing around to assist with children's activities with suburban moms was definitely not her \$600 cup of tea. She looks out into the distant city in concentration, whirlpooling her champagne in her glass.

What did that Irene say that Field Day was, again? She tries to think back to that night, and instead of remembering the details of the event, she can only remember the abhorrent sensation of an entire basket of garlic bread in her face.

Jinsol. Sooyoung scoffs a little into her drink, narrowing her eyes in irritation so hard that she can barely see. She thinks about the wretched blonde - the way the woman had no idea how to eat spaghetti peacefully, the competition she created when she tried to challenge her over every little thing, and most of all, how she just *knows* Jinsol was responsible for The Bugatti Incident ten years ago.

But if Jinsol was at that meeting, it means that she might be there too.

Would it be so bad to finally put her in her place? Publicly? While everyone watches her, humiliated, like the loser she is? "Okay," Sooyoung smiles warmly at Jiwoo. "No problem, baby."

Jiwoo pauses, and widens her eyes. *Well that was easier than I thought.* She relaxes, happy that Sooyoung is finally, *finally* ready to spend time with their daughter. “Good, because I didn’t want to yell,” she affirms, twisting and lifting her legs out of the water to stand.

Jiwoo begins to undo her loose robe to reveal her black designer swimsuit. Sooyoung electrifies at the fine sight, and begins to stare shamelessly, eyeing her wife’s gorgeous body as the swimsuit accentuates all the right places. She smiles. “You would’ve yelled at me?” Sooyoung teases flirtatiously.

Jiwoo must have noted the way Sooyoung was desirously eyeing her exposed figure, because she steps into the bubbling hot water with a smirk. “I would’ve.”

“So authoritative,” Sooyoung breathes, as Jiwoo slowly walks closer to her with a playful smile in the water in the glowing blue water. “Who do you think you are?”

Jiwoo just giggles. When they’re finally only inches apart, Jiwoo stares into Sooyoung’s darkening eyes. “I’ve been waiting for this all day,” she whispers lustfully, staring at Sooyoung’s lips.

“Is that so?” she responds with a smirk.

Jiwoo puts her arms around Sooyoung’s neck, and just when the taller woman begins to lean in for a passionate kiss - “I’ve been *craving* some champagne!”

Sooyoung feels like Jiwoo just put an ice pack on her vagina.

While Jiwoo reaches to pour alcohol into her skinny glass behind Sooyoung’s head, she presses herself up against Sooyoung’s chest, making the CEO’s breath hitch and temperature rise all over again. Her lips flutter unnecessarily by the spot behind Sooyoung’s ear that Jiwoo knows she likes, and Sooyoung knows then and there that Jiwoo is being a tease. Then, all of a sudden, she can feel Jiwoo climbing off of her.

Before she can leave, Sooyoung possessively jerks Jiwoo into her lap.

Jiwoo has a mischievous smile all over her face, looking to the side and avoiding eye contact. To which Sooyoung lifts her fingers, and tilts Jiwoo’s chin forcing her to meet her dark eyes.

“Be a good girl for me.”

Jiwoo’s lips crash into hers. They kiss and they kiss as Sooyoung’s hands anchor Jiwoo to her lap, roaming to hold every inch of her back and slowly sliding under the waistband of her two piece. Jiwoo’s arms move back around her wife’s head, while Sooyoung hungrily kisses at Jiwoo’s neck.

Everything was not happening fast enough as Jiwoo spread her legs and pressed down with her hips onto Sooyoung’s bare thigh, letting out the most sinful whine.

Sooyoung pulls her impossibly closer in her lap and lowers her mouth to leave more kisses and marks on her unblemished skin, living for the every whimper she elicits from her wife.

Jiwoo reaches down once more to pull Sooyoung in for a long, slow kiss, then with an innocent little smile, abruptly whispers onto her lips “I should really get to bed.”

Before Sooyoung knows it, Jiwoo is climbing off her lap and stepping out of the pool. The CEO is left dumbstruck and alone, breathing heavily, watching Jiwoo pick up her robe and calmly walk away. Sooyoung relaxes and attempts at regulating her breathing; if Jiwoo changed her mind, that’s something she can and will respect.

But before Jiwoo can get too far, she stops, and turns to look at Sooyoung one more time before entering their home. “I do need to shower before bed though,” she says, smirking. And just like that, she’s gone, into their home and walking up their staircase.

Sooyoung nearly slips as she scrambles out of the pool, bolting to the door. Jiwoo may have her wrapped around her finger, but she’ll be damned if she lets her get away with that.

After all... she always makes sure to take what’s hers.

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE! Here’s a gift- we already wrote the next chapter. Tell us in the comments your favorite things about this one as always, then enjoy the feast sdkfjsdk! - Cat

Aquarium of the Pacific

Chapter Notes

hey QUEENS i hope u like this LONG ASS chapter i personally really liked writing it like i literally burst a lung ok bye have fun<3 stream zimzalabim - daniela

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next day, the students and staff of St. Jiho's Presidential Academy wait in their parking lot down their school's hill. *The transportation should be arriving any moment now*, Principal Haseul thinks to herself, double checking her Minion-themed clipboard to make sure they're on schedule.

"Hey," she hears, and looks up to see that it's Vivi, walking towards her in a floppy sun hat, looking radiant as ever. "Can I keep you company?" she asks in her soft, soothing voice that Haseul dreams of hearing morning noon and night.

"Of course," Haseul barely hoarses out. She clears her throat nervously, and Vivi stands next to her.

"Are you excited?" Vivi asks, smiling sweetly.

"To be honest... not really," Haseul says. "I get seasick. But it's okay, I came prepared!" Haseul sifts through the contents of her fanny pack and pulls out a pair of enormous noise-cancelling headphones.

"...What?"

"It's just, it's... the sound of the ocean," Haseul says, putting the gigantic headphones over her ears. "I CAN'T HEAR A THING!" she yells, and Vivi laughs in response.

The art teacher taps the side of the headphones to get Haseul to take them off. "Can I tell you a secret?" Vivi whispers.

"Secret secrets are no fun. Secret secrets, hurt someone." Haseul omens randomly.

"What?"

"Nothing. Yes of course you can always tell me a secret," Haseul nervously laughs like the dork she is.

"I don't really know the rest of the teachers chaperoning here on a conversational basis," Vivi says, looking around the crowded parking lot. "Since it's my first year here."

Haseul can sense her nervousness - she remembers her first year, how intimidated she felt. "You can be my buddy for this one," she reassures with a kind smile.

Vivi laughs. "Just this one?"

"As many as you want," Haseul says, turning her head to hold eye contact with Vivi, and that look alone is enough to throw Haseul for a loop for the rest of the day.

“Why don’t I give you my number?” Vivi asks, and Haseul’s heart races in her chest, mouth instantly going dry.

“I- uh,” This is the moment Haseul has been waiting for, but she didn’t know it would come this soon!

“In case we lose each other later,” Vivi clarifies, and Haseul sinks in realization, praying hard that Vivi doesn’t notice how red her face had become.

“Haha, right! HAH! My number is... Oh God what’s my number again...” Haseul can’t think straight when Vivi is staring at her like *that*, with her patient smile. “Haha okay... 9, 1, 1, NO that’s... haha that’s not it.”

The art teacher is actually laughing at her lousy attempt at humor, and Haseul has no idea how this woman seems to find her funny when no one else on the planet does. (Besides Yeojin, but that’s always laughing *at* her.) Haseul manages to recall her digits eventually, and Vivi registers them as a contact while Irene approaches them from the other end of the lot. The PTA president is donning all black and skinny sunglasses.

“What up Men In Black!” Haseul banters, and Irene just looks at them with a straight face.

“Hi Irene, everything alright?” Vivi asks.

Irene sighs deeply. “Seulgi and I went to a wedding last night, and I don’t mix well with alcohol. Or... anything that gets one under the influence for that matter.” Irene explains groggily.

“Oh yeah, I heard you get extra loopy,” Haseul says.

“Who did you hear that from?”

“The grapevine,” Haseul winks. Irene, again, does not laugh. (But Vivi does!) “A little bir- okay, I heard it from Seulgi.”

“Well that’s only because she was there when I tried Mary Juana in college... and let me just say... never again. Alcohol, on the other hand, is processed just fine,” Irene winces. “Well at least until the day after.” she says, pressing fingers to rub her forehead.

“YOOOOO WHAT THE *FUCK!*” Yeojin screams excitedly among the crowd of students, and the PTA president, principal, and art teacher look up to see three all-black luxury buses begin to pull into the parking lot.

“YEOJIN WILL YOU *PLEASE*- Oh my,” Haseul breathes, astounded. “When did we get these?” Haseul should probably know, since she’s... the principal. But let’s be real, Irene is the real principal here.

“They were donations. From one of the moms,” Irene says.

“Which one?” Vivi asks.

“Sooyoung Ha,” Irene says, managing an eye roll from behind her sunglasses.

“Oh! The fashion CEO? You know, I saw her on The Buzzfeed the other day.” Haseul says with a nod.

“It’s Buzzfeed. Just, Buzzfeed.” Irene corrects. Yeri’s really been supplying her with this kind of

knowledge.

“Prrrretty sure it’s The BuzzFeed Irene, I think I would know.” Haseul says, sure of herself.

As the buses begin to pull in closer to the crowd of kids, Irene screams in horror as her daughter, Yeri, Naruto runs in front of the still-moving leading bus, causing it to harshly brake while Yeojin cackles. Irene puts her face in her hands in stress.

“You know,” Vivi starts, “the ride is an hour or two, and I heard the seats recline,” she says in support.

Irene, realizing she is free to sleep, sprints to board the bus and knocks three students down in the process.

When the St. Jihyo’s 8th grade class is finally segregated into their three groups for each bus, Yeojin and Yeri, in their matching bucket hats, rush onto theirs. “YOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Yeojin screams upon seeing the entirety of the luxury bus’s interior, making the driver right next to her hiss in pain.

Inside their field trip bus are well-cushioned paired reclining chairs, a lavatory in the back, a smoothie bar with stools, an attendant in uniform like they were on a plane, and a walkway wide enough for an obese child to make snow angels without hitting the seats.

Chaewon and Hyejoo file in first to sit in the middle, knowing they will be sitting next to each other, no discussion needed. Yeri and Yeojin follow, taking the seats in front of them.

As Choerry boards the bus with her boyfriend in tow, she hears “Choerry, over here!” Nayeon is sitting next to Jeongyeon, and is pointing expectantly to the two seats in front of her that she appears to have saved.

And then again, Choerry hears that joy-filled crackhead laughter. She looks further to see Yeojin and company, laughing incredibly hard, despite them just boarding the bus less than a minute ago.

The purple-haired girl walks with Chad to take the seat Nayeon saved for her, but something that she can’t explain is stopping her from doing so - something pulling her in another direction.

“Choerry,” Nayeon menaces, “You’re holding up the line.”

It’s hard, it’s uncomfortable, and Choerry doesn’t even know if she’s making the right decision - but like fighting to walk to shore to escape a tugging tide, Choerry takes a leap of faith and walks right past Nayeon to take the open seats in front of Yeojin and Yeri.

“Choerry, what are you doing!” Nayeon nearly yells.

“Don’t worry about it, we have all day!” Choerry nervously shouts back from her and her boyfriend’s new seats, settling in.

“Well well well...” Yeojin says, peering over the top of the seat in front of her to look down at Choerry. “If it isn’t Barney.” Choerry opens her mouth to say something sweet in return, but instead -

“Hey don’t talk to my girlfriend like that you fuckin’ gremlin,” Chad asserts from his seat, narrowing his eyes at the delinquent.

“Chaddington! What happened to your accent? How’s the queen doing by the way, is William still

a cheater?" Yeojin retorts smugly.

"You wanna go, you little troll?"

"Yeri look, now the talking crumpet is trying to preach to us," Yeojin says to her seat partner-in-crime.

"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO CRUMP YEOJIN," Yeri screams with closed eyes and both airpods in, clearly not hearing what her friend has said. Yeojin reaches to yank both of her airpods out, and Yeri yells in pain.

"FUCK!" she screams, and she turns to see Irene, from the front, already giving her the death stare with her nightmask pulled off. "Hahaha I'm sleeping," Yeri says full of fear, hiding herself behind the seat.

Behind them, Hyejoo looks through her small tote bag and her jean pockets for her own pair of airpods so that her and Chaewon can listen to music together. That's their routine for every field trip, and Hyejoo has a lengthy playlist prepared with their favorite tracks.

As the dark-haired girl finds the charging case, she looks over at Chaewon in her floral dress who is delicately lowering the window, then sinking back into her seat with an excited smile.

"You... I-look," *Pretty today. Extra pretty today.* Hyejoo wants to say it, but she can't get the words out.

"Hmm?"

"You look like you're ready for some music," Hyejoo goes with instead, handing her crush the other airpod and picking a song to start with from their playlist.

Chaewon, with the airpod in, screeches at the first chord of the song, immediately recognizing the track. In her high voice, she says "Chun-Li! My favorite!"

[Hyejoo's playlist is more Chaewon's favorites (the ones that the brunette can tolerate), as opposed to her own. But Chaewon idolizes Nicki Minaj, and Hyejoo loves playing as Chun-Li in Street Fighter - they'll always find their silver linings.]

Chaewon proceeds to bounce in her seat and rap every word flawlessly in her little voice. "Call me 2 Chainz, name go ding dong, bitch it's King Kong, yes I'm King Kong, this is King Kong? Yes, Miss King Kong." Hyejoo just giggles and nods her head along, enamored with the star of her free show.

Yeojin, in the back of the bus, is harassing the smoothie attendant. "I want one of everything," the short girl declares, gesturing to all the nozzles on the machines behind the bar.

"You want... a glass of every flavor?" The attendant asks in disbelief.

"No, you *fool*. I want one of everything in one glass. God. Where do they hire you people." The attendant begins to do what she asks. Yeojin's phone buzzes in her lap.

Yeri : god i cant wait to shit in that bathroom

Hyejoo, looking to Yeojin receiving her beverage from the smoothie bar, asks Chaewon "Do you want me to get you anything?"

“Can we just eat the desserts your mom packed?” The tiny blonde smiles.

“Of course,” Hyejoo says, looking for the insulated container in her tote. One afternoon last year, Jiwoo had asked Hyejoo how the homemade dessert she packed for her tasted. Hyejoo told her she didn’t know because she gave it to Chaewon, and Jiwoo has packed her two ever since.

Haseul, Vivi, and Irene are all assigned to board the same bus. Sadly for Haseul, they have to split up; Haseul takes the back, Irene is already passed out in the front, and Vivi sits at the emergency exit in the middle.

Vivi moves to the front to do a roll call, and calls for everyone’s attention. Suddenly, the entire bus erupts into boisterous cheering and applause. “MISS WOOOOONG,” someone gutturally yells.

“MOTHER VIVI-SA,” Yeojin chants. “MOTHER VIVI-SA, MOTHER VIVI-SA,” and nearly all the students on the bus are chanting at the top of their lungs.

From her seat in the back, Haseul’s heart warms at the sight of the students taking such a strong liking to the new teacher. Vivi gets everyone to settle down with her soft laughter, and successfully calls roll. When she finishes, they dramatically begin to clap again, then settle back into their seats as the bus begins to move.

Outside of the massive, reflective blue buildings of the Aquarium of the Pacific, all the eighth graders are gathered by the central fountain. The sun beats down mercilessly on them all, but the occasional oceanside breeze helps.

Principal Haseul whips out her bullhorn and tells all the students that she will be reading off the names for pre-assigned small groups that the eighth graders will be in for the entirety of the day.

Choerry, sitting at the rim of the fountain, is being a good listener while Dahyun recounts the time when she met Nash Grier in a Wendy’s parking lot. Too good of a listener, in fact, that she doesn’t hear Haseul calling out her name.

“Choerry!” She calls again, and so do other students trying to get the purple-haired girl’s attention. “You’re in this group.” Taken aback, Choerry stands, and heads over to the section she’s supposed to stand by. She’s never been completely separated from her circle even in field trip groups; Choerry is sure at least one of their names will be called next.

“Yejin,” Haseul reads off her clipboard. “Hyejoo, Chaewon, Oh God who made this list. Yeri,” she continues, reading off a few more names, and before Choerry knows it the principal has moved on to read the next group. Choerry stands awkwardly, feeling uncomfortable and alone, as the other students in her group begin to gather near her.

“What’s wrong madam president? Feeling lonely without your pet monkey by your side?” Yeojin sneers at Choerry.

“Chad is not my pet.” Choerry says in response.

“I was talking about Nayeon, but if the shoe fits.” Yeojin steps closer, her eyes barely visible under her bucket hat.

“Hey friends, let’s keep things crackalackin,” Chaewon says in her tiny voice with a peace sign and a pose, Hyejoo at her side.

“We’re going on some kind of tour first, right?” Hyejoo asks.

“Yeah, then we’re supposed to go whale watching afterwards,” Yeri says.

“The only whale I’m watching is that fat ass,” Yeojin says, staring out to the aquarium’s entrance at a tall blonde with her back turned to them.

The woman, clad in business casual, is talking to employees in front of her, and just when Choerry is starting to think that she looks familiar -

“OH *SHIT* CHOERRY! Ain’t that your *mom*?” Yeojin gasps.

The blonde turns around, and is indeed Dr. Jinsol Kim - Choerry’s mother, whose ass Yeojin just compared to a whale.

Choerry has her head in her hands, but Jinsol can recognize her daughter’s purple hair from a mile away. “Choerry!” she says, with a big smile on her face.

“Ohhhhhohohoh my God...” Yeojin grins nervously at the hot mom walking closer to their group.

“She’s so pretty,” Chaewon breathes with wide, sparkling eyes.

“Hey!” Jinsol says, as her daughter looks up at her in confusion and her classmates look to her in awe.

“Hey...?” Choerry says, puzzled. “You’re... here? Don’t you work at like, a corporate office...?” She asks somewhat coldly.

Jinsol picks up on the tone. Jungeun never said reconnecting with their daughter would be easy, but she’s going to try nevertheless.

“I do, but I knew you guys were coming today and I wanted to do your tour group!” Jinsol says with a smile, and Choerry just continues to look perplexed.

The girl can’t even remember the last time she’s even interacted with her mother and it wasn’t a minuscule, depthless conversation at home. *Random...* Choerry remarks internally.

“Are these your friends?” Jinsol asks her daughter, smiling at everyone.

“No, not rea-”

“Hi ma’am, pleasure to meet you,” Yeojin says extending her hand to the CEO, with a complete 360 shift in demeanor and tone. “I’m Yeojin, part-time eighth grader, full-time rap god.”

Choerry’s eyes hurt from rolling so much.

Her mother, at the front of the line, is giving yet another overly dramatic presentation on some sea animal that was right in front of them behind the thick glass wall.

Jinsol had been doing this at every exhibit they had stopped in front of. Whether it was jellyfish or stingrays, she never missed a single second to show off her aquatic intelligence. Choerry might’ve been enjoying it if it was just her and her mom. But because Jinsol has barely made eye contact with her daughter throughout the entirety of the tour so far, it just feels like she’s showing off to everyone *but* her.

“Alright everyone, if you’ll walk this way we can go on to the next exhibit. I actually have a skit I prepared for this one!” Jinsol begins walking proudly towards another room, gesturing for the students to follow her.

Choerry trudges along with the crowd, and is about to witness her mother perform a one-woman show on the life of a starfish when she overhears someone whispering behind her.

“Are we ready for the operation?”

Choerry turns to see Yeri talking to Yeojin a few steps away.

“Affirmative.” Yeojin chuckles deviously, and she and Yeri quietly sneak off toward the shark exhibit.

Choerry stopped to think for a moment. What she *should* do is probably just ignore them and continue along with the group. She turns back towards the glowing blue room ready to resume her trip, but stops in her tracks when she sees her mother switching rapidly between starfish costumes.

With a sigh, she starts making her way towards the shark exhibit.

After various twists and turns, Choerry is just about ready to give up on finding the other two girls. It isn’t until the final tank at the end of the room that she spots Yeri alone, standing against the wall and looking apprehensively side to side. Choerry scans the area for the smaller, louder girl but doesn’t see any sign of her.

Suddenly, the door reading ‘EMPLOYEES ONLY’ opens, and Yeojin steps out rolling a cart with a giant tank on top of it. Inside, clearly swimming around is a small shark. She hands the cart off to Yeri.

“You know what to do.” Yeojin says seriously. Yeri nods, then swiftly rolls the cart down another corridor.

Yeojin brushes off her hands and begins jogging to leave the premises, but before she can go any further, she runs straight into Choerry. They both fall to the ground. Stepping back up, Yeojin squints at the girl in front of her and huffs out in frustration.

“What are you doing here Waluigi? You could’ve blown my cover!” Yeojin crosses her arms.

“Are you... stealing from my mom’s aquarium?” Choerry tilts her head genuinely confused.

“You just don’t understand my craft.” With that, Yeojin makes her way back to the group, flipping her hair in Choerry’s face on the way.

Choerry is unsure of what just happened, but for some reason, she feels herself stifling a giggle. She follows Yeojin who’s rejoined the rest of their classmates. Yeri is somehow there too already, completely shark-less. Her mother seems to have finished up whatever she was doing and is smiling wide, clearly not noticing that her daughter was even gone.

“Alright guys! Let’s go to the boats!”

“No offense, but this is hella boring.” Yeri groans from the back of the boat, her head thrown behind her. Her airpods had finally died, and she’d been waiting with her group for whales for about 40 minutes now.

The boat rocks steadily beneath them as they sit in the ocean, the aquarium's glistening blue buildings barely visible from where they sit. Their group had been cut in half for the boat trip, leaving only Yeri, Hyejoo, Chaewon, Choerry, and-

"Finally someone fucking said it!" Yeojin remarks, slapping her legs and standing up to stretch.

Choerry looks up to see if their boat's driver would say anything about Yeojin's shameless profanity, but Haseul was sitting comfortably at the steer, ears covered with giant black noise-cancelling headphones. Choerry had heard her briefly mention to them that, for some reason, the sloshing of the waves makes her seasick as opposed to the swinging movement, and still doesn't understand how that works.

"I mean... It can get fun! We just have to sit still for a little longer. I've seen them before." she says, in reference to a time long, long ago. Choerry doesn't know why, but she has the urge to impress the others. It is, kind of, *her* aquarium.

"Hate to break it to you Choerry, but I really don't think we'll be seeing whales anytime soon." Hyejoo sighs, leaning slightly on Chaewon without even realizing.

Choerry feels a strange, urging sense of panic, and forces herself to come up with something. "*I do* have Heads Up on my phone..."

"I guess we don't have a lot of other options do we. Plus, I'm kind of the shit at this game." Yeojin holds out her hand for Choerry to pass over her phone. She scrolls through the various decks and settles on the one titled 'Act It Out'.

"Here Chae, you go first, you're better at guessing." Yeojin hands Choerry's phone over to Chaewon who then lifts it up to her forehead, ready to try to guess the word that her friends will silently act out in front of her. The game's signature sound effect dings and the first word appears.

TRAMPOLINE

All the kids start slightly bouncing on the boat, careful not to move too forcefully.

"Uhh... bouncing? Umm... jumping? Um..." Chaewon's eyebrows knit in confusion as the girls continue to bounce.

Choerry, seeing the little success of their efforts at physical pictionary, decides to switch tactics. She stands, still bouncing, however now she's moving her hands in a ridiculously aggressive, patternless, and frenzied manner while doing so.

"Jazz hands? Crack addict? ASS by Nicki Minaj?"

Hyejoo's eyebrows crinkle. "Why would that be it?"

"You guys are bouncing to the beat of it." Chaewon states matter-of-factly.

"Choerry, what the fuck are you doing?" Yeojin looks over at the purple haired girl going crazy in the corner.

Choerry continues moving her hands but this time, she decides to jump for real. Unfortunately, she lands on an unused life jacket and slips backwards. Choerry's body is now halfway off the boat's edge, head first.

"OH MY GOD!" Her group mates scream, as Choerry falls backwards in slow motion off the boat

and into the Pacific Ocean.

“Oh I know!” Chaewon gasps and claps, as if not having noticed her classmate literally falling out of their boat. “TRAMPOLINE!”

The other eighth graders run to the side to see Choerry, soaking wet and frantically dog-paddling to keep herself afloat. “Oh shit.”

Yejin takes a beat to process what just occurred, and then falls over rolling on the boat’s floor. Yejin is laughing so much that tears are coming out of her eyes and noise can’t even come out.

Yeri looks worriedly at Choerry, now floundering more intensely in the water, not even able to speak as she fights off the infinite water to gasp for air. “Um... guys? I don’t think she can swim.”

“Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God.” Chaewon is panicking and pacing back and forth across the floor uselessly, nearly stepping on a laughing Yejin who is about to burst a lung from her wheezing.

“I guess it’s just us.” Hyejoo groans calmly walking over to Yeri, who is for once very concerned. “Rock, paper, scissors to see who saves her?”

Yeri nods and both girls raise and lower their fists before displaying their moves. They do, and Hyejoo points a finger gun at Yeri.

“That’s not a fucking move!” Yeri exclaims.

“Fine.” Hyejoo sighs. Choerry ferally screams from the water to their side, about to drown while her classmates take their sweet time playing games.

Both girls count to three and display their moves once more. Hyejoo holds her fist in a ball while Yeri’s hand is flat. Hyejoo rolls her eyes and walks over to the side of the boat where Choerry is. She grabs a life preserver under a seat next to her, and heads over to the edge.

“CHOERRY. GRAB THIS, I’LL PULL YOU IN.” Hyejoo lofts the life preserver in Choerry’s general direction and grips on to the rope attached to it.

“Oh God,” Chaewon is still reciting behind them as she paces frantically in a never-ending circle. “Oh GOD!” Chaewon randomly starts screaming, still not doing anything to help. “OH GOD!”

Principal Haseul still has her back turned, deaf and oblivious.

After splashing around and going nowhere for another two whole minutes, Choerry is able to finally grab onto the floatation device.

Hyejoo is working on pulling her in when all of a sudden the motor starts.

“Alright kids we’re heading back!” Haseul says, barely checking on the kids behind her before violently lurching the boat forward.

“OH SHIT!” Yejin, who just managed to stand up, is thrown into a barrel roll across the boat from the force. Chaewon is knocked down to the floor. Hyejoo almost falls into the water, but Yeri catches her by the legs, keeping her on the boat.

“YEOJIN TELL YOUR OLD WOMAN TO STOP!” Yeri squeals, barely managing to keep a hold on Hyejoo. “CHOERRY IS BASICALLY TUBING BRO.”

Yeojin, despite her mother's psychotic driving, manages to stand once more, and looks over to the back of the boat. Poor Choerry is hanging on to the life preserver for dear life and is being pummeled ruthlessly through the water. Yeojin has to look away to keep herself from bursting into laughter again.

"MOM!" She tries to make her way to their designated chaperone, but everytime she gets close enough in reach to shake her shoulder, Haseul unknowingly jerks the boat violently in another direction. "MOTHER!" Haseul jerks the wheel again, sending Yeojin to the floor.

"JESUS CHRIST YOU CRAZY HAG," Yeojin shakes off the pain when suddenly, she catches a glimpse of a box next to her on the boat's floor labeled 'EMERGENCY'. Yeojin reaches out and opens the box, pulling out a small bright orange flare gun. Aiming slightly in front of her mother, Yeojin pulls the trigger sending a screaming flare straight into the sky.

Startled, Haseul kills the motor. She takes off her headphones while rolling her eyes upon seeing the flare.

"Yeojin how many times have I told you- Oh..."

Haseul looks back at the discombobulated pre-teens on her boat. All the kids were off their feet, some barely hanging on to the edges. Yeri was pinning Hyejoo onto the floor, both of their eyes closed in relief that the movement had stopped. She noticed Hyejoo holding a rope that Haseul followed off the boat in time to see Choerry shaking violently on the life preserver.

"Irene's going to kill me." Haseul whispers under her breath as she runs to the back to pull Choerry to safety.

Haseul's boat group decides to go to lunch a little earlier because of the incident. Yeri, Yeojin, Hyejoo, and Chaewon sit on the grass opening up their snacks. Choerry sits with them, soaking wet and wrapped in a towel that Irene not-so-politely asked an employee for when she had met them at the dock.

Hyejoo pulls out a pack of gummy dolphins that she bought from the gift shop. She rips the bag open and instinctively offers some to Chaewon, who graciously accepts.

Chaewon takes a handful and begins to toss them at Hyejoo playfully, evoking laughter from both girls when one bounces off Hyejoo's nose. Now more prepared from the previous attempt, Hyejoo is able to catch the next dolphin in her mouth.

"Hey can I try?" Choerry asks from beside them, still managing to be perky with her messy, tangled hair a darker shade of purple from the ocean water dampening it.

"Sure," Yeojin says, as she reaches across the grass, picks up the candy bag and hurls it at Choerry, hitting her directly in the face.

"YEOJIN!" Chaewon reaches across from her and pushes her enough for Yeojin to lose her balance. "Come on, she had a bad day."

Choerry rubs her nose and blinks, barely harmed. "It's fine...!"

Yeojin sits up and her shoulders slump slightly. "No she's right, I mean... you did fall off a boat."

For the first time since the incident Choerry makes eye contact with Yeojin... and like some sort of

volcano, laughter erupts from inside her. It starts slow with little low giggles, then suddenly, she is cackling and falling to the grassy floor. The other girls look at her, confused.

“I FELL OFF A BOAT.” Choerry chortles profusely on the floor. Yeojin starts chuckling too, and soon enough the whole group is laughing together.

“You really did.” Yeojin has tears coming out of her eyes. “And I...” she barely says through laughter, “...had to pop a cap to get my mom’s attention!” The group bursts into hysterics yet again.

“*CHOERRY!*”

All the girls whip their head around to see their remaining classmates flood the picnic area. Nayeon is standing near a tall tree with Dahyun, Jeongyeon, and Chad, clearly waiting expectantly for the purple haired girl to join them.

“Well you better get back to your presidential cabinet. Your bitch is calling you.” Yeojin says, her demeanor far different from the joy they all shared a few seconds ago.

Reluctantly, Choerry stands up. She doesn’t realize how comfortable she’d been feeling until the sensation begins to dissipate. “Thanks for the candy.” She turns and slowly makes her way back to her usual group of friends, almost struggling to step forward.

Elsewhere, Ms. Wong and Principal Haseul sit alone together on the bench of a shaded clearing, distanced from the St. Jihyo’s students that picnic in the grass.

The principal reaches into her bag to bring out her lunch, a sizable fresh salad that she prepared this morning, garnished with strawberry slices and her own vinaigrette. (If Principal Haseul can do *anything* right, it’s make a salad.) Pulling on the lid, she notices that Vivi next to her is yet to take out any food. “Are you gonna eat anything?” Haseul asks her.

“Yeah, um... Nate is gonna bring me something.”

“Oh,” Haseul tries her best to mask her disappointment as Vivi mentions her boyfriend’s name.

“That’s nice of him!”

“Yeah, he’ll be here any minute,” Vivi says with a smile, eyes full of light.

But five minutes pass... then ten, then twenty - and still, no show. Haseul can feel the air between them shift, can see Vivi’s light fading each time she checks her phone to nothing, can hear the need in her voice even though she says that she doesn’t want to bother him.

To take Vivi’s mind off of it, the principal begins to talk about her chaotic day with her group of Vivi’s favorite students. She pulls her best (worst) jokes out of her ass to make her laugh, too, silently cursing out the lousy boyfriend of the angel next to her for leaving her lunchless. *Well, maybe something happened*, Haseul thinks. *Oh I hope he got in an accident. NO-*

Suddenly, Vivi’s phone buzzes, and Haseul leans over to check, relieved at the possibility of having any news on the art teacher’s lunch.

They both see it when the notification displays on the screen.

NATE has sent you \$30 for Uber Eats

They stare at it together, in shock and in silence, as the birds around them chirp and younger children in the clearing play. Vivi, disappointed and embarrassed, tries to think of anything to say,

but can't seem to.

"Here," Haseul says with her normal, casual smile, purposely not making a big deal to so Vivi doesn't feel more embarrassed. "Eat this," she says, softly placing the salad onto Vivi's lap. Haseul hadn't yet took a single bite of it, insisting on not eating until her coworker got her food.

"No, no it's okay," Vivi says, hastily opening the Uber Eats app, not wanting Haseul to have to not eat anything at all because of her. She sorts the choices by fastest delivery times, and sees that the quickest possible option is going to take 45 minutes to get to her. Lunch is over in seven.

"Vivi," Haseul says, gently placing her hand on the teacher's shoulder. Vivi stops to look up upon hearing her first name; Haseul's never called her that before. It sounds sweet when she does.

"Take it," Haseul continues. "I had a big breakfast anyway," she says with a little laugh. (Haseul didn't eat breakfast at all.)

But that doesn't matter, nothing else matters to her except making sure Vivi eats. Hesitantly, Vivi accepts the salad.

Vivi thanks Haseul. She's always thankful for her, really, knows that work wouldn't possibly be the same without her. The art teacher doesn't want to make a big deal out of it, but words can't express how grateful she feels, so she hopes her eyes say enough as she looks into Haseul's and smiles meaningfully.

"It's no problem, really." Haseul reassures - and she means it.

Vivi carefully opens up the tupperware. "Can we at least share?"

The brilliant orange sky shines above the students and chaperones of St. Jiho's as they stand together in the clearing, waiting for their luxury buses to return and take them home.

"Choerry?" The eighth grader, freezing in her damp towel as the temperature begins to drop, hears the familiar voice of her mother behind her. "Why are you so wet?"

Instantly more irritated, Choerry turns to face Jinsol. "I fell off the boat," she states dryly.

"*What? Oh my God!*" Jinsol is clearly alarmed - her daughter, even though it wasn't exactly under her watch, fell into the ocean under her watch. *Who the hell was watching her, anyway?*

"Yeah. I almost drowned." Choerry adds with a frown, fighting the chattering of her teeth.

"You *what?*"

"You heard me," she dares.

Jinsol narrows her eyes in confusion and a little bit of offense. Her daughter, characterized by her virtually perpetual bubblyness, is suddenly chock full of attitude. "How could you have drowned though? You know how to swim. I taught you myself."

"Well I guess you got too *busy* to finish my lessons, because I couldn't remember." Choerry retorts harshly, then looks away.

Jinsol, stunned with guilt, opens her mouth to respond. Nothing comes out.

Looking back up at her mother's silence, Choerry scoffs and gathers her things from the floor, preparing to walk away. "I'm leaving," she says coldly. "I guess you'll just take your stupid car home. I'll see you there." She shoves the towel into her bag. But Choerry still feels years of more bottled-up anger bubbling inside of her, begging for release. "Or... maybe I won't? Who knows!"

With that, Choerry, shivering from the cold and her own adrenaline, throws her tote over her shoulder and walks away to join the rest of her classmates. Jinsol stands still, forced to face more of the damage she's done, and painfully watches her daughter walk away.

It's about thirty minutes later when the buses finally arrive. Choerry, who had been waiting alone, boards the luxury vehicles, gleaming in the darkness. She settles back into her plush seat as her other classmates board as well. There is not yet any sign of her boyfriend, but she saves the seat beside her regardless.

Exhausted, the girl allows herself to lean back and let her eyes close. But just as she is on the brink of slumber, she hears someone settling into the seat next to her.

Not just someone... her mother. Choerry opens her eyes, and upon seeing her she immediately narrows them. "Wh-... Why are you here?" she asks, laced with fatigue.

Jinsol has an unreadable expression as she sets her bag in front of her. "I can get my car tomorrow."

"...Oh." Choerry is confused, unsure of how to react, and too tired to object. She doesn't want to see her mother right now, but sleep weighs heavily on her body. She says nothing more.

Before Choerry closes her eyes again, Jinsol gently sets a new sweater on her daughter's lap. With the aquarium's logo on the front, the sweater is fresh out of the gift shop. Choerry is stunned and... maybe just a little bit touched. But she refuses to show it. "Wear this," Jinsol commands in a soft voice.

(Jinsol figured, for once, she may as well be there.)

Choerry takes the big sweater and pulls it over her head, then pulls out her wet shirt from under. The sweater's inside is lined with fleece, and the purple-haired girl practically buries herself into its warmth. Tucking half of her head into the sweater, she closes her eyes, and takes a deep breath of relief from all the freezing cold she'd experienced today.

The bus's engine starts up, Ms. Wong takes final roll call, the lights inside the bus turn off. Choerry feels herself succumbing to a warm, comfortable sleep.

Maybe she should thank her mother. But Choerry, out of spite, doesn't let herself verbalize her gratitude. As she finally drifts away, though... she very, very hesitantly leans to her mother's side.

Jinsol, shocked, looks to her daughter resting her head on her shoulder. Choerry's breathing had slowed, and Jinsol's was nonexistent - the CEO was too afraid of ruining the moment. *When was the last time this happened?* She can't even remember. It's almost as if she's forgotten what to do completely.

The bus roughly hits a bump in the road, and Choerry, still fast asleep, shifts out of discomfort away from her mother's shoulder and lays in her lap.

Jinsol can't believe it, and her heart swells. After a few minutes, reluctantly, she moves her hand to lightly rub up and down her sleeping daughter's shoulder.

Maybe, just maybe, she's done something right.

Behind the mother and daughter, Haseul sits, her head heavy on the window and her bag in the empty seat next to her. She hears the text tone from her phone, and reaches to check who it was.

Vivi: Hi

Vivi: I just wanted to say, again, thank you.

Vivi: I really appreciate it. And you.

Haseul's heart immediately begins to race in her chest, and she sits up, energized. *And you. And YOU.* The last words just repeat over and over in her mind. She types up about a million versions of a reply, from "Always" to "Anything for you," but they're all too blatantly gay. She thinks about how Vivi is probably watching as she struggles to type a response, and panics.

Haseul: [SENT A STICKER]

Vivi, in her seat, snorts at the image - it's a minion grinning with its thumbs up.

And across the aisle from her is Hyejoo, looking at her own phone as well for some music for her and her favorite person to share.

"Oli," Chaewon says softly.

"Hmm?"

"Can you put on the playlist you have with slower songs? It's calming; I see that you listen to it a lot," the blonde asks.

"Which one?"

"That one," Chaewon points. Hyejoo's playlist that Chae is pointing at is named 'home' with a pastel pink shade as its cover icon. "I like that one."

Hyejoo is frozen - Chaewon is pointing, completely oblivious, at the playlist that Hyejoo made about her. All the love songs that take Hyejoo's mind to another world, a world where the two of them are more than just friends, every calming fantasy she's ever had of Chaewon is the soul of this playlist.

And here her crush is, listening to it in her free time, liking it, and wanting to listen to it together.

"O-okay," Hyejoo stutters. She presses shuffle.

As the two girls lay back in their seats to rest up from the wild day they've had, "By Your Side" by The 1975 begins to play.

The beginning beats hit, and Chaewon, face barely illuminated by the fleeting streetlights through the window beside her, says "I love this one," with a smile.

Hyejoo stares at her with all the love in the world as the music plays. "...I love it too."

You think I'd leave your side, baby

You know me better than that.

You think I'd leave you down, when you're down on your knees

I wouldn't do that.

And if only you could see into me.

Chapter End Notes

Michael jackson sunbaenim i love you he said EVERYONE COMMENT YOUR
FAVORITE PARTS bye oh my god i love Michael jackson sunbaenim

Picture Day + Field Day

Chapter Notes

People wanted OLIVIA'S PLAYLIST that Hyewon were listening to at the end of the last chapter, so here it is!

<https://tinyurl.com/y5q32z7s>

ALSO THIS CHAPTER IS LONG LONG, PREPARE YOURSELF.

- Cat

hey queenies im going to loonacon LA so u better say hi to me but dont refer to me as the milf smackdown writer in person or else i'll drop you from the top of the staples center mwah oh also this chapter is REALLY long and i hope u like it -daniela

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Alright, here we go. Olivia, you first.”

“What are we playing again?”

“ *Who Would You Do*. The St. Jihyo's staff edition.”

The raven-haired eighth grader had honestly zoned out, too busy focusing on the newly orange leaves falling from the massive oak trees outside. Hyejoo doesn't really feel like herself today, with a ribbon in her tied hair and a dainty gray shirt dress on, in addition to a nearly full face of makeup.

This chilly September morning is this year's dreaded Picture Day, and Jiwoo had woken up early to make sure her daughter looked extra adorable before leaving the house for her Masterchef filming trip. Outside the building, scattered clusters of parents fix up their kids.

Hyejoo waits in line for pictures with Chaewon, Yeojin, and Yeri in the corridor of the main office building. The line ends at one of the classrooms, which had been cleared out as a temporary photo studio for the day.

“Um...” Hyejoo racks her brain for a name of a staff member she'd “do.” But at the same time, she doesn't really want to answer as Chaewon looks at her expectantly. Chaewon, with her wavy blonde hair and adorable striped dress. She has to stop herself from staring. “I wouldn't really... ‘do’ any of the staff,” Hyejoo says.

“Laaaaaame,” Yeojin responds. “Come on. You're telling me Tiffany isn't hot?”

“Who is... Tiffany...?” Hyejoo narrows her eyes.

“Ms. Young. Get with it,” Yeojin clarifies.

“Why do you call the teachers by their first names?” Chaewon asks, just as confused as Hyejoo.

“They will be addressed by their government names until they earn my respect. Like, Ms. Wong is Ms. Wong. But Haseul is Haseul,” Yeojin explains.

“She's... your mother...” Hyejoo says, astonished.

“Hey!” The group is interrupted by a very smiley Choerry, skipping towards them from the end of the baby blue hallway. The girl’s previously all-purple hair now has an ombré to a Starburst pink, probably a last-minute Picture Day decision, although Hyejoo has to admit it does look very nice on her.

“Hey Peppa Pig!” Yeojin greets.

Choerry cheerily settles in front of the group of friends standing against the wall. “You guys all look so nice!” The girl looks at all of them individually with light in her eyes. Choerry is either extremely pure of heart or just a great actress because her impressed expression doesn’t even falter upon seeing Yeojin in an oversized black T-Shirt and a giant gold chain around her neck. “Yejin what does your shirt say?” Choerry asks with a bubbly smile.

Yejin moves her arms to reveal the text printed on her shirt in gigantic white letters -

REAL EYES

REALIZE

REAL LIES

“I let my mom pick it out for me,” Yeojin says proudly, nodding her head. “She thought it was really deep.”

“That is very wise,” Choerry says seriously.

“Do you know who said it?” Yeojin tests.

“Umm... Jesus?”

“Equally influential, equally wise. Tupac Shakur.”

“Oh,” Choerry nods. “Isn’t he, like, dead or something?”

Chaewon covers her mouth and closes her eyes in pain.

“Choerry,” Yeri hisses, “*That’s not the kind of language we use here,*” she says seriously.

“I miss him,” Chaewon breathes into her hand, fighting tears.

“Wha-” Yeojin looks at her with such flared eyes that Choerry fears for her life. “Um, okay sorry sorry! Anyways umm... Whatcha ‘doin?” she asks with her signature pep.

“Vomiting,” Yeojin says.

“We’re playing who would you do with the staff members,” Yeri grins. Yeojin looks at her from behind Choerry, betrayed, and puts her arms up in an X while mouthing profanities.

“Ooo fun! Can I play?”

Yejin sighs, as the line slowly begins to shift closer to the entrance of the picture room. “Okay. Give it a go. Who would you do.”

“Mr. Namjoon.”

Yejin rolls her eyes. “Get your het agenda out of here please.”

“First of all... I’m not *het*. Second, I was just... feeling the room.” Choerry says, looking at the other girls who are all visibly unamused. “But okay.”

“Okay,” Yeojin smirks. “Name one female teacher that’s your type then.”

“Mrs. Chunggha is hot.” Choerry says, proudly.

Yeojin nods approvingly. “True. I want her to bake a cake in my ass.”

“She’s so hot,” Chaewon says, suddenly out of her spontaneous post-Tupac depression attack. “She has a belly button ring, you know.”

Hyejoo narrows her eyes. “How do you even know that?”

“You can’t prove anything.” Chaewon says matter-of-factly.

Choerry’s phone suddenly begins to alarm in her pocket, and she checks her screen with a gasp. “Ah! I have to get to a student council meeting!”

“Don’t those start at 10:00?” Yeri asks, randomly. “It’s 9:45.”

“I like to be there ten minutes in advance to prep with Empowering Women podcasts,” Choerry explains with a smile, already fixing her hair.

Yeojin bows. “The parliament waits for no one.” Choerry giggles, says farewell, and is out the door, crossing the quad to the next building.

And just when the group is about to resume their game -

Principal Haseul, business-clad, is coming out of her office just a few steps away. She turns to the students lined up against the wall, and gasps dramatically at Yeojin with a giant smile, as if laying eyes on her for the very first time.

“Didn’t she... drop you off at school?” Chaewon asks quietly.

“OhhHHHHH MY GOD!” Haseul exclaims, drawing the attention of every other student in the hall. “IS THAT THE WORLD’S BEST DRESSED SINGER?” She practically yells at her daughter.

“It’s rapper, but continue,” Yeojin says, smiling as her mother walks towards her and her friends.

“Sorry, I spilled coffee on the notecards you gave me this morning.”

“It’s fine, we can edit it out.”

“Edit? This is *literally* real life.” Hyejoo says, clearly confused.

“Hi girls!” The principal greets at Yeojin’s friends. “Yeojin go over there,” she gestures to the center of the hallway. “Let me get pictures of you.”

The principal’s daughter prepares to position herself in the center of the hallway to pose like a model.

“Awww,” Hyejoo teases, “You gonna take pictures with your mommy?”

“Shut the fuck up, where’s your mom huh?”

The words cut through Hyejoo like ice, and suddenly, the atmosphere's gone sour.

Her mouth is dry, and she can't even respond. She feels everyone *looking* at her, the "Oooo"s coming from peers she doesn't even speak to who bore witness to Yeojin's burn.

They don't know, Yeojin herself doesn't even know the way the words have hit a particularly sore spot.

Hyejoo looks down at the floor, suddenly feeling sick to her stomach. She picks up her backpack from behind her and leaves the line, storming off to the girls bathroom in the next hallway.

After making sure the stalls are empty, she leans back on the cold tile wall. Hyejoo looks down at her shoes, tasting blood from how hard she bites her lip to keep herself from crying.

The solitude doesn't last for long though, because in mere seconds, the girl sees the bathroom door open in front of her in her peripheral.

She's tense until she hears the familiar voice. "Oli..." At the presence of another person in her moment of vulnerability, Hyejoo can't help but feel a bit like the walls are closing in; all she really wants right now is silence and privacy.

Still examining the marks on her shoes, Hyejoo feels Chaewon stand right beside her, and sees her dress in the corner of her eye. "She didn't mean it, it's okay..."

"*Shut up,*" Hyejoo says harshly. But she regrets the words before they're even finished coming out of her mouth.

Chaewon, as if she's just touched a burning object, moves away, stunned and silenced. But she doesn't leave. Perhaps it hurts more, as Hyejoo's words echo throughout the silent bathroom.

She hates that she snapped at Chaewon. She hates, for some irrational reason, that she has two moms and neither of them are there. And she hates how embarrassed someone made her feel about it.

Hyejoo's eyes are still trained at her feet. But after a few moments, Chaewon takes her hand into hers anyway.

The Ha residence is dark and lifeless later that night. Sooyoung is working late again, and Jiwoo is, of course, out on her trip, so Hyejoo doesn't know why she clutches the beloved old wolf plushie so tightly to muffle her sobs. Must be force of habit.

She's curled up under her duvet in the dark, curtains drawn, and she's finally let go of every restraint that held back her tears all day. But instead of helping, the more the crying makes her the sadness compound, and the more she pities herself, physically and mentally all alone in the dark.

Hyejoo cries into the pillow until she's spent, weak, and can only let out jagged hot breaths with closed eyes. She can't fight the flurry of bad thoughts from entering her mind.

All you do is mess everything up

That one repeats the most.

Suddenly, her phone pings from the other side of the room, interrupting her thoughts. She elects to

ignore it, rolling over on her other side. Then, it pings again.

Hyejoo takes a deep breath. She really just wants to stay in bed - not truly by her own volition, but because the covers feel so heavy and comfortable on her body. But she slowly peels off the blankets and exposes her overheated form to the cold air, sniffing as she steps down from her elevated California king.

She turns on one of the elegant lights hanging from the ceiling at her bedside, and makes her way to her gaming corner, where her phone rests next to the PC she built herself.

Mom: how is everything at home?

Mom: :)

Hyejoo picks up her phone, but doesn't raise the keyboard - she doesn't know what to say, and doesn't want to lie. She already feels guilty for dampening the mood the other day when they talked downstairs.

Before she can type up some kind of reply with squinted eyes, the phone starts to buzz and the screen is entirely Jiwoo's caller ID photo (a very close-up selfie of her nostrils she had accidentally taken on Hyejoo's camera). She doesn't want to answer, but she just can't bring herself to reject it. After all, her mother would probably keep calling until she picked up (it wouldn't be the first time; her record is 26).

Hyejoo clears her throat before picking up. "Hello?" It comes out congested.

There's a concerned silence on the other end before Jiwoo speaks. "What's wrong sweetie?"

The question alone just makes everything real, and every ripping emotion comes up all over again. The tears well up in her eyes. "Nothing," she hoarses out.

"...Is it a boy?" Jiwoo asks, as Choerry would put it, 'feeling the room'. Hyejoo's never opened up about this kind of stuff to her before.

"NO," Hyejoo assures, quite aggressively.

"Okay, how about you tell me what's wrong honey," Jiwoo asks her daughter gently over the phone.

Hyejoo squeezes her eyes shut. "It's..." Two moms aside, she feels terrified opening up about her secret crush on Chaewon to anyone. "It's a... girl."

Jiwoo nods, of course, it's *her* daughter, it was stupid to assume she'd be straight. "I'll kick her ass. I will end her life. I have six black belts from six different institutions. You know how close I am with Dwayne Johnson, he will *not* say no to me-"

"What? No, no don't... do anything, it-" the child snuffles, not quite sure of how to say it. "It was my fault." Hyejoo bites her lip. She looks out into the darkness of her room.

The celebrity is met with long silence at the other end of the line.

"Everyone makes mistakes sweetie," Jiwoo reassures calmly. "Nobody's perfect. Not even me!" she jokes enthusiastically in a funny voice.

It gets a little laugh out of Hyejoo. She sighs. "I know, Mom."

“Hyejoo... Just remember that you can always apologize, and learn from your mistakes. Everyone makes them... But, what matters is when we become better.”

She thinks on her mother’s words. “...Okay,” she replies, followed by some more silence.

“Do you want me to stay on the line? I can sing some Shakira for you if you want-”

“No, no it’s okay. I think I’m going to. Um. Apologize to... her. Now.”

“Okay sweetie... I’m so proud of you. Just be sincere okay?”

“Okay.”

“And you can always talk to your moms about girls! We’re always here. And... I love you very much, don’t ever forget that,” Jiwoo says sweetly.

Hyejoo smiles. “I love you too.”

“Sleep well sweetie! And don’t forget to make sure the doors are locked.”

“I will, Mom. Bye,” Hyejoo says, ending the call, feeling a weight taken off her shoulders.

“Oli?”

It’s been an hour of apology practicing later, but suddenly Hyejoo is at a loss for words. “H-Hi,” she stammers, her voice less congested than earlier.

“Hi,” Chaewon says hesitantly, her voice smaller than usual at the end of the line. “Is everything okay?”

Just be sincere, Jiwoo’s voice echoes in Hyejoo’s mind. “I don’t deserve you.” The girl blurts randomly. Hyejoo has suddenly forgotten the entirety of her script, so she might as well just say what’s on her mind.

“I- Oli, are you okay? Of course you do-”

“Chae,” Hyejoo interrupts. “I...” *Why is this so hard?*

I love you.

She shakes her head. That’s not what this is about.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry for snapping at you. Today.” Hyejoo says, pacing around the room in nervousness. “I don’t... I don’t know why I did, I think I was just overwhelmed - that’s, that’s not an excuse though, and you don’t deserve that ever. I...” Her palms sweat. “I just wanted to tell you... that I didn’t mean to... and that you’re one of the most important people in my whole life and that I’m sorry,” the eighth grader rambles.

“...Wowee,” Hyejoo hears Chaewon say softly into the phone. “Oli... it’s okay, okay?”

“No, it’s not-”

“*Oli*. It’s all good in the hood,” she says, and it just sounds funny in her high-pitched, tiny soft voice. “I forgive you okay? Just, like, stream my new track on Soundcloud.”

Hyejoo, dizzied just moments ago, suddenly feels anchored once again to her familiar words, her favorite personality. “Chae. I- I won’t do it again-”

“Oli as much as I love hearing your voice-” Hyejoo’s heart flutters. “-it’s really late, go get some sleep...”

“Okay... sorry, sorry... And sorry, again... Goodnight, okay? I’ll... uh... see you tomorrow!” she says with a little skip in her voice, unable to conceal the thrill in her heart.

“Goodnight, I love you,” Chaewon says honestly, effortlessly.

Hyejoo thinks she just might pass out.

“Oh my God,” she says, dropping her iPhone to the floor.

Forgetting about the call, she runs to her pillow and screams her lungs out into it. Then, she returns to retrieve her phone only to see that she’d accidentally hung up. “AAAAHH! NO NO *NO!*” Hyejoo screeches, and redials the blonde as fast as she can.

“Hello?”

“HI! Sorry, um, heh, there’s just really bad reception here, I’m, um, in a tunnel.” Chaewon just laughs and tells her it’s no problem. Hyejoo takes a deep breath. “Goodnight...” Somehow, she musters the strength to say the next words without coming apart. “I love you too.” The words fill her heart to the brim once finally released into the world, and even if they’re not taken the way she means them, they ring true. Hyejoo loves her.

Chaewon laughs a little, and the sound is music to Hyejoo’s ears. Speaking of music, Chaewon really can’t hang up without another shameless plug. “And don’t forget to check out my new track.”

“‘Eat Ass Smoke Grass’ right? I already did. I have your notifications on.”

She hears Chaewon do a little cheer. “Yay! Okay, goodnight Oli!”

Hyejoo hangs up, then squeals.

It’s midnight when Jungeun finally finishes up with work.

As she walks through the private parking structure in downtown Los Angeles, her eyelids are heavy despite the numerous coffees she’s downed today. She gets into the BMW quickly, locks the doors, and takes a moment to lean back and close her eyes as the car’s interior lights dim to blackness. But she won’t let herself fall asleep; she’s done this too many times to know.

Today was rough. With financial presentations on meetings on reviews, the CFO had not a single moment of rest - and she anticipates work to get more hectic as the week progresses.

At least I don’t have to wake up early, Jungeun thanks, as she remembers Jinsol is taking some time off. Taking Choerry to school so early every day was becoming incredibly taxing, especially after consecutive nights like this.

Speaking of Jinsol, Jungeun’s eyes open at the bright flash of light across the center screen, displaying an incoming call from her wife. Before the ringtone can blare and disrupt the peace, she

answers.

“Hi,” Jungeun tiredly says.

“*Hi baby,*” Jinsol greets, voice a little higher from the call. “*Just getting off?*” she asks.

“Mm,” Jungeun hums in response, eyes closing again.

“*I just got in bed and I wanted to say goodnight,*” Jinsol says. “*I probably won’t see you tomorrow morning, since I have that early conference call.*”

Jungeun’s eyes open in panic. “What... conference call?”

“*Not for the aquarium, it’s one for the state Ocean Protection Council.*”

“So... I’m taking Choerry to school tomorrow?” Jungeun asks with a fatigued frown, paining at even the thought of waking up at 6:00 AM again.

“*What? Yeah, like you always do, silly,*” Jinsol laughs all too easily into the phone.

Jungeun doesn’t have the strength to argue, even the tiny possibility of an argument arising is stressful to consider - so she takes one, deep breath, and lowly says - “Okay.”

“*Goodnight, I love you,*” Jinsol says, sleepily.

Jungeun tells her to sleep well, as Jinsol attends to one of her many duties except her family.

The sun shines high in the cloudless sky the next day as Jinsol Kim enters St. Jihyo’s Presidential Academy to begin her volunteering for the school’s annual Field Day.

As a fresh PTA member, Jinsol had chosen the eighth grade events she was going to volunteer for, and Field Day was one she was actually quite excited for. The CEO, despite her normally easygoing personality, loved competitive sports. She was actually recently banned from all sports bars in Los Angeles for causing a “public disturbance” during the Rams v. Patriots Super Bowl game. (How was she supposed to know the TV cost \$10,000?)

Anyway, she was excited - and even more so when she catches a glimpse of the many fun-looking stations already set up in the grass with music blasting from a massive sound system. As she steps onto the large field, she spots some familiar faces from Olive Garden. Jinsol quickly locates Irene with a big blue bin next to her.

“Jinsol!” the PTA president greets with a smile. “We’re just about to get started. These are the other eighth grade parents that are gonna be helping out today!” Irene gestures to the other ten people around her, and Jinsol smiles kindly. “We’re actually waiting for one more person.”

While waiting, Jinsol makes conversation with two nice ladies who stand next to her. They introduce themselves as Wendy and Joy Park, married with one daughter in Choerry’s class. They’re incredibly pleasant as they colorfully explain to Jinsol what today entails, and how even though their daughter is sick and out for the day, they still wanted to come help out the school. The CEO thinks to herself that this day is going to fly by easily.

That is, until she spots a tall, trim, and all-too familiar figure approaching the field.

Sooyoung struts towards them to the beat of “M.I.L.F. \$” by Fergie suddenly blasting from the

speakers lining the field. Donning a perfectly coordinated Nike outfit, the CEO has a venti iced coffee in hand and YSL sunglasses shielding her eyes. Her long ponytail pendulums perfectly with every step, and even with sneakers on she steps on the ground like she's punishing it for disrespecting her.

All eyes are on her in complete awe, except Jinsol's, which are rolled back as far as they can go.

Out of *all* the events on the calendar that Sooyoung could have chosen, she *had* to choose this one?

"Great, Mrs. Ha is here so now we can finally get started," Irene sends a tightlipped smile in Sooyoung's direction, and Jinsol notices she doesn't even wait to get one back before starting. At least someone agrees that Sooyoung Ha is the most obnoxious human being alive.

"Hi everyone, thanks for being on time," Irene says, looking at everyone but Sooyoung. (Sooyoung knows but honestly doesn't give a shit.) "Field Day will officially commence in a few minutes! Each of you will be given a list of eighth graders to be your designated team for the day. You are responsible for escorting them to every station. I will give each of you a shirt with your team color for you to wear. I'll also be giving you a schedule so you know exactly where to be.

"Also, Field Day is a tournament. The winning team will receive a pizza party, and believe me, these kids want a pizza party. Encourage them, but also, make sure they don't get too out of control."

Jinsol and the other parents watch as Principal Haseul quietly walks towards them from behind Irene with a big smile. Haseul is dressed in a bright white polo shirt and khaki shorts. A white line of sunscreen covers the length of her nose, and a matching visor is wrapped around her head. She proudly carries a bullhorn.

Irene continues her speech while Haseul puts her finger to her lips and mouths a 'Shhh!' to the parents, who watch, confused and a bit apprehensive.

Principal Haseul, still undetected by Irene, brings the bullhorn directly to the shorter woman's ear. "HEY," she growls into the bullhorn, in a deep voice.

"AHHH!" Irene screams at the top of her lungs. Jinsol has to cover her mouth.

Irene scowls at the principal in vehement contempt, while Haseul smiles back at her like an innocent child.

"ANYWAY," Irene hisses, as an excited Haseul beams at her side. "Whichever team finishes with the most points will compete in the final round - the obstacle course. Remember you are your group's team leader, so we expect a lot of team spirit for you and the kids to have fun today!" Irene looks around and clasps her hands together.

Jinsol looks over at Sooyoung, who stands alone, a bit isolated from the crowd. *I guess the one thing she can't do is play well with others*, Jinsol thinks, almost pitying her before remembering literally anything else about her personality.

"Alright, the students will be coming out any moment, so in single file, come up to get your schedule and shirt," Irene says, bending down to open the blue bin at her side.

Jinsol stands and walks towards the forming line before being harshly bumped to the side.

"I was here first sorry." Sooyoung flips her ponytail directly into Jinsol's face.

Jinsol is just about ready to make her bald but before she can, someone taps her shoulder.

“Hey Jinsol! Isn’t this great!” Seulgi smiles brightly, and it takes everything in the CEO not to laugh.

Seulgi is wearing extremely bright neon leggings and an even brighter flowy top. “We get to spend time with our kids and play games!” The woman is basically overflowing with joy, and Jinsol can’t help but feel a little more at ease.

Seulgi was right. Jinsol was going to spend more time with her daughter today, and be one step closer to making up for her mistakes of the past. Today was about making progress with Choerry - and Jinsol remembers she shouldn’t be using her energy on anyone else. Especially not Sooyoung, no matter how much she wanted to rock her shit.

“Umm, Irene? Can I change my team color? Red doesn’t really match my outfit,” Jinsol hears Sooyoung ask in front of her upon receiving her shirt.

“No,” Irene says flatly, not even making eye contact. “Jinsol,” she calls, moving on. Sooyoung narrows her eyes under her shades, snatches the shirt and walks away.

Jinsol, now donning a bright blue t-shirt, looks over her team list. A warm smile blooms on her face when she sees Choerry’s name towards the top. The only other name she faintly recognized was at the bottom.

YEOJIN JO

The “full-time rap god” she met outside the aquarium who had called her THICC (which the eighth grader quickly clarified as “Thoughtful, Honest, Intelligent, Caring, and Compassionate”).

Well, this is going to be an interesting day.

How the fuck does she keep winning? Sooyoung thinks to herself as she watches Jinsol’s high-spirited bunch of children win yet another game.

Jinsol’s team had been competing at the station before Sooyoung’s all day long, so the latter had been forced to witness Jinsol’s success three times in a row and as hear every obnoxious cheer they happily sang together.

Sooyoung and her nemesis weren’t even in the same bracket, but it absolutely irked the taller CEO that Jinsol and her band of misfits were clearly on their way to the championship.

And losing? To *Jinsol*?

There’s just no way in hell she could let that happen.

Sooyoung looks back at her disheartening group of kids. They had not won a single game... not even the bean bag toss. One of them stands texting, another naps on the grass, another is picking their nose. The only remotely promising one was some tall kid named Chad. Her own daughter was also on the team, but Hyejoo had not made eye contact with her mother all day so far. Sooyoung had no idea how to talk to her, so she decided to take the easy route and just not.

Not exactly the team dynamic of the year.

Interrupting her from her thoughts, she feels a tap on her shoulder from behind, and turns to see Jinsol with a smug look on her face. “The station’s all yours,” she sing-songs in a way that makes Sooyoung want to backhand her into the fifth dimension.

Instead, she assesses her schedule. The businesswoman does some quick math, and realizes that she can still get to finals if her team manages to win all the remaining games.

“Listen up, rats,” Sooyoung commands, and all the alarmed kids are looking back up at her, appalled. “New strategy. We’re winning the rest of the games.”

“Yeah, no we’re not.” A short-haired girl chuckles, not even looking up from her phone.

Sooyoung narrows her eyes under her sunglasses, and slowly walks toward her. Hyejoo and the other kids, fear building inside all of them. “And what is your name, little girl?” Sooyoung asks in her honey-like tone.

Jeongyeon’s heart stops beating as Sooyoung’s face is only inches away from hers, towering over her. “Jeongyeon,” she manages to say boldly.

“What kind of a stupid fucking name is that?” Sooyoung asks the child lovingly with a smile.

“Jesus Christ,” Hyejoo says under her breath with wide eyes.

“It means loyal flower,” Jeongyeon snaps back, feeling brave for some reason.

Sooyoung slowly lifts her sunglasses and looks into Jeongyeon with piercing eyes. “Why don’t you be a loyal flower and show some team spirit before I mail you an animal carcass,” she says. Before Jeongyeon can answer, Sooyoung snatches the phone out of the eighth grader’s hand.

“*HEY!* You can’t do that!” Jeongyeon whines.

“I can do whatever I want,” Sooyoung says smoothly, and looks over to the rest of her team, now cowering. “Everyone give me their phones!” The kids stand, motionless. “*NOW,*” their new dictator nearly screams, and the kids scramble to do so.

“The rules are simple!” Sooyoung continues, collecting expensive smartphones and carelessly clattering them into her bag. “Win Field Day, I give you your phones back. Don’t, and you get to watch me run over each and every one of them with my car and make an ASMR video out of it.”

Hyejoo didn’t know if her mother was really about to destroy the new \$1,000 iPhone she just got her, but judging from the way she was talking to them, she didn’t want to test her to find out.

From the other end of the field, Seulgi leads her group over to their same station. Her kids are happily laughing, despite them not winning a single game either. Sooyoung sees Seulgi also got placed with her child, Yeri, and also recognizes one of the other little faces but she’s not sure from where...

“Oli!” The tiny blonde girl from the opposite team is waving enthusiastically towards Hyejoo, and Sooyoung thinks the child might break her arm from moving it so aggressively. The CEO looks over to her daughter, who is now smiling the biggest, sweetest smile she has ever seen on her. (Actually, she can’t really remember the last time she even saw her daughter smile.)

“Okay guys!” Ms. Chungha, the teacher manning the station speaks up. “The watermelon eating competition requires 3 players from each team!”

“Alright this is how it’s going to work you little freaks. Chad, you’re up. You with the overbite let’s have you go. And Sami? Sony? You’re the other one.”

The girl whines. “It’s Somi... Don’t you want to learn our names?”

“Not really, no.” Sooyoung pulls each kid by their matching red shirts and sends them towards the table. Sooyoung looks over to the innocent, happy-go-lucky team and begins to diabolically laugh quietly to herself, completely missing the terrified look Hyejoo is giving her.

“Who’s that? I’ve never seen her before,” Chaewon asks, resting her head on Hyejoo’s shoulder as they sit together in the grass.

“That’s... my mom. My *other* mom.” Hyejoo feels completely and utterly embarrassed.

“Oh! She looks like you! She’s pretty.”

Hyejoo blushes after realizing what Chaewon just said. Her heart trembles, but she tries to shoo the thought away. *She doesn’t mean it that way*, Hyejoo reminds herself.

The two girls perk up at the sound of terrified screams. At the other end of the field, three students are blasted roughly to the ground with rock hard balloons that don’t look made for water balloon fights. They seem to have been pelted from above: namely, the roof of the main office building. But when Hyejoo looks up to identify the culprit, there is no one there.

“Probably Yeojin,” Hyejoo says calmly.

“Yeah,” Chaewon agrees.

“Okay Team Banana, do we have any volunteers for this round?” Seulgi’s ears raise as she smiles at three little hands waving in the air. She sends them over to the table with Sooyoung’s stony team members.

“Okay kids, whichever team can eat the most watermelon without using your hands wins!” Ms. Chungha says, placing a plate of watermelon in front of each kid.

The kids eyes go wide as they look at the plates in front of them and Ms. Chungha raises a little racing flag.

“On your marks! Get set! GO!”

The kids start devouring their watermelon one by one with hands tied behind their back. Cheers from both sides are ecstatic and full of passion. Some, undoubtedly, are more passionate than others.

“COME ON! IF YOU’RE NOT CHOKING YOU ARE DOING IT *WRONG!*” Sooyoung screeches from the sidelines. “FOR THE LOVE OF GOD SOMI, ARE YOU EVEN TRYING?” She yells directly at the little girl, who yelps and tries her best to eat faster.

Hyejoo covers her face in embarrassment.

Soon, nearly all the kids have given up. Only one child from Seulgi’s team and Chad remain.

“EAT IT CHAD!” Sooyoung is yelling even louder than before, her voice cracking.

Chad, from his seat at the table, struggles to take another bite, and tears start to well up in his eyes. He starts to wail out in pain into the watermelon as the child next to him continues chomping

away.

Sooyoung gets up from the sidelines and angrily walks next to Chad, who is about to give up chewing and just rest his exhausted face on the cool watermelon. Sooyoung lowers herself right next to his ear.

“*EAT IT!*” She screeches, directly into his ear, and Chad starts to cry.

But through his tears, he manages to continue out of fear, while the child next to him passes out onto the plate. Sooyoung jumps up and down with excitement.

“*HA! IN YOUR FACE!*” She points at Seulgi who looks at her in confusion.

“What’s on my face? Oh God, I knew I shouldn’t have eaten that chocolate donut. Well, I’ll see you later!” Seulgi is about to leave when Hyejoo steps forward to stop her.

“Wait! Mrs. Kang! Umm... Can I be on your team?”

Sooyoung’s smile falters as the feeling of her heart sinking, as she looks down at her child. “What? Why?”

“Oh um. If that’s okay?” Hyejoo suddenly backtracks, flinching as her mom turns toward her. “*Please don’t hit me,*” she whispers in a tiny, fearful voice and eyes squeezed shut.

“What?” Sooyoung asks, shock all over her face. She would never hit her daughter, and the fact that Hyejoo actually thinks that she would-

“What’s going on here?” Haseul says, appearing out of nowhere as if she materialized right next to them. “IS SOMEONE HAVING PROBLEMS AT HOME?”

“*No!*” Hyejoo and Sooyoung both exclaim in unison.

“Good, because they never told me what to do next,” Haseul says, exhaling gratefully.

Seulgi seeing the apparent dismay on Sooyoung’s face decides to say something. “Sweetie, I think the teams are numerically equal, it would mess up the order-”

“I’ll switch with you.” Yeri steps forward. “I can’t be on a team called Banana. Sorry mom, love you.” She hugs her mom before quickly switching places with Hyejoo. Hyejoo immediately runs towards the little blonde girl she had been waving at earlier.

“Well... okay, let’s go.” Seulgi begins to move her team, mouthing “Sorry” towards Sooyoung before she and her kids are out of sight.

“Don’t worry Mrs. Ha, I’m ready to put in WORK.” Yeri says before doing one individual jumping jack.

Sooyoung sighs. “Alright. Well. Let’s go team. We’ve got a championship to win.”

Jinsol doesn’t know how the hell Sooyoung did it.

She’d actually been getting along wonderfully with her team, and they had easily cruised through the stations undefeated. They had won their bracket quite easily, and with Yeojin’s masterful rhyme game (her words, not Jinsol’s) they’d even created a set of fun chants to shout for each other

during matches. The best part of it was that Choerry has been giving her little to no attitude, as if she's having too much fun to remember what a terrible parent Jinsol has been.

However, when she sees who is competing for the spot against them, her jaw nearly detaches from her face and hits the ground.

Sooyoung Ha's unorganized and ridiculously (she means *ridiculously*) uncoordinated team has somehow scampered their way into the semi-finals.

Luckily for Jinsol, their opponents would be nearly impossible to beat. Not that she enjoyed watching kids suffer... but she was definitely going to love watching Irene's team demolish Sooyoung's.

"Came to see your final competition?" Jinsol jumps from her thoughts, nearly falling from the gym bleachers.

She manages to stabilize herself and squints at the aromatic woman (*How does she smell so good with that much sweat?*) standing near her, head tilted, arms crossed, and a smug smirk plastered on her face. Jinsol's teeth grind.

"Yes, but I don't think they've arrived yet." Jinsol states, her arms crossing to mimic the woman in front of her.

Sooyoung scoffs. "I'll have you know my team is the best of the best. Top tier athletes and excellent teammates."

Jinsol looks behind Sooyoung. Several kids looked like they had just been hit by a train, and one of them is strangling another for a water bottle.

"Sure." Jinsol remarks, trying to keep a laugh from escaping her throat. Sooyoung must've picked up on the sarcasm because she too turns to look at her team.

"Oh are you kidding me- ASSISTANT COACH!" Sooyoung screams, startling Jinsol. Immediately, Irene and Seulgi's daughter appears out of nowhere wearing sunglasses and a whistle.

"Yes Coach Ha?" Yeri salutes the taller woman.

"Can you please stop Jeongyeon from killing Somi."

"On it. HEY DUMBASSES," Yeri blows her whistle and runs towards the debacle on the sand court.

"You were saying?" Jinsol smirks as Sooyoung glares in return. Sooyoung opens her mouth to speak, but is cut off by a chant coming from the entrance.

"LEFT! LEFT! LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT!"

Irene is walking her bright pink colored team through the gates of the volleyball court. Correction: Irene is *marching* her bright pink colored team through the gates of the volleyball court. No doubt about it, this team is here to win.

"HALT." Irene asserts, voice more stern than usual. "Troops. Formation please."

As if being pulled by strings, all the kids move in unwavering synchronization to a predetermined position on the court or beeline to the bench. Irene walks over to Sooyoung and Jinsol.

“Hi Jinsol, glad you can watch this match.” Irene nods kindly towards her, and Jinsol does the same.

Irene’s eye line moves to Sooyoung in obvious distaste and Jinsol swears she could see the taller woman tensing up. “Sooyoung.”

Irene offers a hand to Sooyoung, for the sole purpose of shaking it and wiping her hand on her pants afterward.

“May the best team win.” With that, Irene spins on her heel and heads toward the bench.

“What she said.” Jinsol smiles, and receives a sarcastic one in return from Sooyoung before the brunette leaves to gather her kids.

“What was *that* about?” Jinsol hears at her side, and looks to see Choerry suddenly at her side.

“Are you going to fight Mrs. Ha or something?”

“What? No, of course not.” Jinsol assures, maybe a little too enthusiastically. She lets out a breath, not even realizing that her body had been tense from being in the presence of the devil incarnate.

“Oh. Okay. Because that would be *so* bad.” Choerry has a look of relief on her face and Jinsol forces a smile onto her own, for her daughter. The mother looks out into the large gym, struggling to find the words for what to say.

“Choerry-”

Suddenly, a blur of a person sprints full force into the gym, catching both of their attentions.

“HEY GUYS.” Haseul was in the middle of the court now, breathing quite heavily and bending over to catch some air, bullhorn in one hand and a clipboard in another.

“I just participated in another one of my pranks. I don’t want anyone to catch me. I won’t tell you what it is but I promise it’s a *splash!*” Haseul remarks, looking pretty proud of herself.

When she’s finally able to breathe regularly again, Principal Haseul stands up straight, ready to referee. “Let’s get this bread!”

“ARE YOU SERIOUS JEONGYEON? ARE YOUR LEGS *BROKEN* OR SOMETHING? TIMEOUT REF.”

Sooyoung is screaming loud enough to break the sound barrier, and honestly, she’s probably one octave away from popping a vein. But she doesn’t care. She *has* to win this match, and these useless pre-teens are screwing it up.

The two moms’ teams are on the third and final volleyball set. The score is now 25-24, with Irene’s team only needing one additional point above Sooyoung’s to win. Team Red had just lost a point, due to Jeongyeon missing a spike that the other team had violently slammed onto their side.

“Are timeouts even allowed?” Haseul flips through her pocket sized copy of *Volleyball For Dummies*. “You know what, I have to pee, so court is in recess.” Haseul climbs off the referee stand and wobbles toward the gym restrooms.

Irene mumbles something about working with idiots, while Sooyoung pulls Jeongyeon to the side,

out of earshot from everyone else.

“What was that? You know you can move your feet in this game right? You have the brain capacity to understand that?”

Jeongyeon looks absolutely irate. “This game is *fucking STUPID*. I don’t want to play anymore. Especially not for you, you STUPID FUCKING DINOSAUR!”

Jeongyeon turns to walk away, but Sooyoung seizes her arm to turn her back around. Sooyoung lowers her voice to a hiss.

And boy, is she about to come down on Jeongyeon like the clap of God.

“What the fuck did you just fucking say about me? You little bitch? I’ll have you know that I graduated top of my class in the Navy Seals and I’ve been involved in *numerous* secret raids, on Al-Qaeda. I have over 300 confirmed kills. I am *trained* in guerilla warfare and I’m the top sniper in the *entire* U.S. armed forces. You are nothing to me but just another target. I will wipe you the *fuck* out with precision the likes of which have never been seen before, on this earth. Mark my words. You think you can get away with saying that shit to me? Think again fucker. As we speak, I’m contacting my secret network of spies across the USA and your address is being traced right now. So you better prepare for the storm maggot. The storm that wipes out the little thing that you call your life. You’re fucking dead kid. I can be anywhere, anytime, and I can kill you over 700 ways, and that’s just with my bare hands. Not only am I extensively trained in unarmed combat, but I have access to the entire arsenal of the United States Marine Corps and I will use it to its full extent to wipe your miserable ass off the face of the continent you little shit. If only you could have known what unholy retribution your little attitude was about to bring down upon you. Maybe you would have held your fucking tongue. But you couldn’t! You didn’t! And now you’re paying the price. You goddamn idiot. I will shit fury all over you and you will drown in it. You’re fucking dead kiddo.”

None of what Sooyoung just said was actually accurate, but she thought if she delivered it all well enough, it would work out.

Jeongyeon looks at the mother, absolutely horrified. “I’m s-so sorry Mrs. Ha, I-I swear I will do whatever you want, please don’t k-kill my family.” Jeongyeon was shaking violently and starts sobbing into her hands. “P-please don’t-” she chokes on her gasps, “give me to the terrorists!”

Sooyoung leans close to her covered face once again. “Now stop crying and go win this *FUCKING* game!”

Jeongyeon nods excessively, and sprints back to her position right as Haseul returns from the restroom. The referee climbs back onto her platform.

“Okay let’s continue! Pink team’s serve!” Haseul blows the whistle around her neck and the ball crosses the net. It bounces back and forth multiple times, each red team member going for the ball like their lives depend on it. (Most of them think it pretty much does.)

A boy on Irene’s team sends the ball flying slightly a little too far to the left, and Sooyoung is positive it was going out of bounds.

“CHAD DO NOT TOUCH THAT BALL!” She screams from the sidelines, and Chad immediately backs off from the ball, only for it to hit the line.

Haseul blows the whistle. “PINK TEAM’S POINT. That’s the game ladies-”

“THAT WAS OUT!” Sooyoung interjects, lying in an attempt to get the point.

“I, um, I thought if it lands on the line, it counts as in.” Haseul whispers down to Sooyoung.

“Yeah... B-But clearly it was out.” Sooyoung puts her hands on her hips from behind Haseul’s platform.

“This has got to be a joke.” Irene says, standing up on the other side of the net. “It was CLEARLY within the boundaries. Irene had already had it up to here with Haseul, especially since *every time* any point was scored Haseul started banging a random tambourine like a maniac.

Sooyoung turns to look at her kids expectantly. Jeongyeon steps forward. “No it was out, I saw it.”

Yeri stood from the bench. “Yeah it was-” Irene quickly glares into Yeri’s eyes, nostrils flaring. “Actually you know what! My eyes were closed.”

“Mine were open and it was out!” Somi says convincingly from her position.

“Well if you all say it was out... I have to believe you,” Haseul states, her face completely serious, staring into a nonexistent camera in the distance. “Because I *always* believe women.”

Silence.

“WE ARE BOTH WOMEN!” Irene yells through clenched teeth, her fists balled so tight that her knuckles are turning white.

“She’s made up her mind!” Sooyoung shouts and Irene is about to stomp towards her but the kids on her bench run up and hold her back.

“Right! Sooyoung’s point! Let’s go! Gang gang!” Haseul blows the whistle.

25-25, Sooyoung needs two more points to secure the win. It’s Jeongyeon’s turn to serve, and she hits it over the net effortlessly. Sooyoung watches as they volley the ball back and forth once again. A tall kid on Irene’s team tries to spike it, but it’s blocked easily by Chad and sent to the floor on the opposite side.

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME JOHNNY?” Irene flares from the sidelines.

“Point Sooyoung! Match point! Booyah!” Haseul blows the whistle once more.

Jeongyeon serves it again and the volleying begins once more. Back and forth it goes, until one of the kids sets up the ball on Irene’s end, and Johnny runs to spike it.

“JEONGYEON REMEMBER YOU HAVE FEET!” Sooyoung belts out from the sideline.

Sure enough, Johnny spikes the ball, but Jeongyeon throws her leg out on the floor and saves it with her foot, sending it straight up into the air.

Motivated by the inhuman noise that just came out of Sooyoung’s mouth, Somi runs towards the ball and jumps. She hits the ball perfectly, and it lands in between two pink players, both barely missing on a dive.

Haseul blows her whistle. “SOOYOUNG’S TEAM WINS!”

Sooyoung jumps up and down cheering, hugging Yeri as the rest of her team collapses on the squeaky tan floor. Irene kicks a chair very aggressively in Haseul’s direction, but barely misses her.

“Woah watch out there Beckham!” Haseul laughs and walks over to the bleachers where Jinsol’s team is sitting.

Sooyoung looks over at the audience, who are all clapping except for one particular blonde. Her jaw is clenched, and she’s glaring in her direction.

Sooyoung curtsies dramatically in return.

Bow down, bitch.

Jinsol cannot believe a single second of what she just witnessed. Sooyoung won the semi-final against Irene. IRENE.

Maybe if Haseul wasn’t the ref it would’ve been different. No, not maybe. It definitely would have been different. But she couldn’t do anything about it now. Jinsol unclenched her teeth when she saw her daughter stand up from the bleachers.

Choerry ran straight to the tall boy on Sooyoung’s team and pulled the sweaty boy into a hug. Jinsol thought it was just plain odd at first. Then her daughter kissed him, and Jinsol involuntarily gagged.

“I know right, they’re disgusting.” Yeojin remarks from Jinsol’s side on the bleachers. “Plus Chad smells. Like literally he smells so bad, I wouldn’t stand within a 10 foot range without a mask. Your daughter is so brave.” She pats Jinsol on the shoulder, then walks over to Yeri.

Jinsol stands up from her place in the bleachers and walks over to Choerry and this boy. Immediately, she catches a whiff of strong body odor, and her throat burns. *Good God.*

Chad sees Jinsol approaching, and panic spread instantaneously spreads throughout his face. “Um, I should go.” He says and quickly exits and walks towards the restroom, leaving Choerry without an explanation. However, when Choerry turns around and sees her mother, that’s all the explanation she needs.

“What do you want?” Choerry asks, irritated and arms crossing as Jinsol stops in front of her.

“Who was that?” Jinsol responds, raising an eyebrow.

“My boyfriend Chad. We’ve been dating for since seventh grade.” Choerry says, as if it were the most obvious statement in the world.

“And why didn’t I know about him?”

Choerry takes a long, exasperated sigh. “Maybe if you cared to talk to me before a week ago, you would’ve known!” Choerry states, the irritation in her voice being replaced with a hint of sadness. Before she can even respond, Choerry walks away to talk to anyone else.

Maybe this day wasn’t going as well as Jinsol had originally thought.

“What are you guys talking about?” Choerry asks appearing next to Yeojin and their other teammates outside by one of the trees that surrounds the gym.

“Okay first of all you just touched Chad, so you either need to be quarantined or take at least 3

steps back for safety measures.” Yeojin says, her hand up as if she just touched something gross.

Choerry just giggles. “Shut up.” She playfully hits Yeojin and Yeojin dramatically clutches her shoulder.

Then, suddenly, a giant round object blurs through the air and hits Yeojin in the back. She immediately falls to the ground, hard.

“Oh my God!” Her surrounding teammates look at her collapsed body on the dirt floor, and look to identify the source of the attack.

“What the...” Choerry says, as she sees a rock-like red balloon rolling away from their feet, filled with water but unpopped. On the side is written HASEUL in big letters. “...What the heck is going on?”

Yeojin looks up from the floor, and sees her mother hiding poorly behind a tree giggling. Confused and frankly a little angry, Yeojin runs up behind her with the same unpopped balloon in hand, and launches it at her the second she comes close enough for a sure shot.

Yeojin feels a little bad when twigs snap as her mom falls hard onto the ground.

“Shit.” Yeojin runs over to her mom but can’t help but giggle just a little.

“YEOJIN? WHY DID YOU JUST HIT ME WITH A BRICK?” Haseul shrieks, sitting up now holding her head. Her visor in no way protected her from the fall, and now she had a fairly large scrape on the top corner of her forehead.

“THAT WASN’T A BRICK. IT’S THOSE FREAKING BALLOONS YOU’VE BEEN PUMMELING PEOPLE WITH ALL DAY! Oh god you’re bleeding sorry.” Yeojin offers her mom a hand up and Haseul takes it.

“Honestly, watching you buy regular balloons instead of water balloons at the grocery store last night and seeing you fill them up until 2am was kind of hilarious, not gonna lie.” Yeojin dusts off her mother and hands her the fallen visor.

“Well I guess this is what they mean by *tough* love huh?” Haseul looks at her daughter and Yeojin can’t believe her. This woman just got blasted full force into the ground and she is still making jokes. Yeojin can’t help but start laughing at her ridiculousness.

“Wait wait wait! I have another one! I perfected this one specifically for you.” Haseul says, clearing her throat. “The weatherman said it might get a bit drizzly outside. You can expect a *LIL’ WAYNE!*”

“Sure grandma, let’s get you to the tub okay, just a few more steps.”

“Okay ha-ha. You know, I try to be fun-”

“I’m just kidding, that was good. Now go get a Band-Aid or something. Love you or whatever.” Yeojin quickly hugs her, warming Haseul’s heart, and the eighth grader jogs back to her friends.

Principal Haseul walks up the stairs of one of the school buildings with her one hand holding her white visor and the other pressed to her forehead. It’s a minor injury, really, but she can’t continue to wear her favorite visor without it being taken care of.

She walks through the hall, and peers inside a familiar doorway.

Ms. Wong sits at her desk, straight red hair tucked behind her ear as she grades papers. Haseul slows and stops in her tracks, just to admire her beautiful coworker - looking concentrated yet completely serene.

The art teacher looks up at the little noise made at her door, and beams. "Haseul!" (After the aquarium, they'd been on first-name basis when the students weren't around.)

Haseul, not wanting to be weird after being caught staring, says a casual "Hey!" before forcing herself to keep on moving.

As she looks at the rest of the hallway though, she realizes she doesn't even know where she's going.

The principal takes backward steps back to the opening of Ms. Wong's classroom, and the teacher looks up again. "Um," Haseul clears her throat. "Do you know where the ice packs are?" she asks with a dorky smile.

Vivi's eyes move to Haseul clutching her forehead. "Yeah, I think I might have one in the back! I have things here just in case of an emergency." She gestures for Haseul to come inside her classroom.

Although students fill the room every day, it feels strangely intimate to be in Vivi's class. To Haseul, it almost feels like an extension of the other woman's home, as elements of the teacher's personality enliven the space. From the organized way she showcases unorganized art to the thin curtains that tint the room a sunset pink when the sun shines through, the room is hers through and through.

Just like if Haseul were in a museum, she basks at the individuality of each eighth grader's art on the walls as she walks over to Vivi's wooden desk. Behind it, she sees a special corkboard, with several drawings and paintings given to Ms. Wong as gifts from the students. Believe it or not, Haseul finds them all beautiful in their own unique ways.

"You really bring out the best in them," The principal's heart beats just a little faster as she says the words to the art teacher.

Vivi, looking through the freezer of her mini-fridge, turns around. "You think so?" she asks, with a proud, optimistic smile.

Haseul is lost in her shining eyes, and can only nod in response, not holding back the wonder from showing on her face.

"I hope so," Vivi says, humble as ever. She hands Haseul the ice pack.

"Thanks so much," the principal says, and turns on her heel to walk away before she has the chance to mess this conversation up with catastrophic gay panic.

"Wait. Haseul-" She stops on command. "Let me see," Vivi says, walking closer to her.

Haseul's heart begins to pound harder the closer Vivi gets, and she removes her hand from her forehead. Vivi's eyebrows furrow in concern.

"Haseul, you're bleeding..." She says, and Haseul melts at the pure concern in her voice.

Vivi walks to a cabinet beside her desk, and looks for a first aid kit. She finds one, and takes out a Band-Aid. Haseul, not wanting to be of any trouble, says a thank you and that she's got it, but struggles with putting a Band-Aid on a cut that she can't even see.

Vivi giggles. "Let me."

Haseul stops breathing as Vivi tells her to sit, gesturing to the edge of a desk adjacent to hers. She dizzies at the sight of Vivi taking the ice pack from her hand and preparing to properly dress her wound, and Haseul prays to God she doesn't faint and fall again.

She sees the teacher pour a mini bottle of hydrogen peroxide onto a cotton ball, and suddenly, Vivi is standing in between Haseul's legs at the edge of the desk.

They're only a few inches apart. Vivi smells like passionfruit and flowers.

"This might sting a little, okay?" Vivi asks in a tone even softer than her usual one as she looks up at Haseul, who is too far up in Cloud 9 to care at all. Before she can press the wet cotton to Haseul's forehead, her fingers delicately dance on the other woman's temple as she tucks fallen strands of Haseul's short black hair behind her ear.

Vivi's hands are soft, just like how they are when Haseul holds them in her dreams. And in their close proximity, Haseul realizes that in all her life, she's never felt such a touch quite like freshly fallen snow, never felt anyone tend to her so gently.

Haseul is thankful for the pink-orange tint that coats the room as a result of Vivi's wisping window curtains, as her face's tomato red hue is muted by it. But in turn, she doesn't get to see that Vivi is blushing just as hard.

Vivi comes closer between Haseul's legs, pressing the wipe to her forehead, and Haseul winces. It barely even hurts, but of course, she can't go five minutes without being dramatic. "Ah - sorry!" Vivi says, genuinely sounding guilty.

"I'm just messing with you," Haseul giggles, and Vivi presses a little harder with a playful smile. "Ow!"

They giggle as Vivi continues to patch Haseul up, and firmly pressing the Band-Aid to the cut. Haseul studies her like a creation she cannot fathom - the curve of her jaw, the way her lips part as she concentrates, her prominent cheekbones. Vivi spends so much time looking down at art that Haseul wonders if she knows she's art herself.

When the other woman finally finishes, Vivi's doe eyes meet hers.

The silence nearly consumes them as they stare meaningfully at each other, frozen in time.

They're used to lunch break smiles and corny jokes. Not lingering looks and being centimeters apart.

But their moment is harshly interrupted when "The Final Countdown" (the Pitch Perfect Hullabahoos version) suddenly blares from Haseul's phone. Haseul curses profusely in her head, and looks down at it on the desk. "Ah, the final round is starting in five minutes, I gotta go," she says, disappointed. Haseul has too much whiplash to look back into Vivi's eyes. But when she looks up just for a second, she thinks she just may have seen the other's disappointment too. She's about to get up from the desk, until -

"Wait," Vivi stops her, grabbing the white visor from the desk with a smile. "You can't forget

this,” she says endearingly, and positions the visor comfortably on Haseul’s head. Haseul is scrunching her face up with a cute smile as Vivi does. “There.”

Haseul stands to leave, and grabs her phone. She thanks her again and again, helps her put the first aid materials away, then walks to the doorway as Vivi sits back down at her desk. Vivi begins to flip through her papers again, and just before Haseul leaves, she turns her head to look back.

Just a little something for the road, Haseul muses, even though she knows deep in her heart that she’ll never really get enough. She struggles to bring herself to finally step out of the door.

Something comfortably unfamiliar pulls at Vivi’s heartstrings as well - but by the time Ms. Wong looks up from her rubrics to get one more look at her, Principal Haseul is already gone.

“So like... do we have a team name?”

Sooyoung looks down at her assistant coach, Yeri, who has just tugged on her shirt a little to get her attention. They are on their way to the last station, and every red team member’s eyes widen, like Yeri just poked a beast with a stick.

The CEO didn’t formally assign Yeri to be her assistant coach, but she found it efficient to have someone else with younger lungs screaming at the kids so she didn’t have to. Plus, Yeri’s spunk was kind of entertaining.

“Yes. We’ll be ‘The Winners’ after this game.” Sooyoung turns away, but Yeri tugs again.

“What about... *Smooth Thunder*. ” Yeri winks and points finger guns in Sooyoung’s direction.

“That’s stupid.” Chad scoffs from the back of the group.

“No it’s not.” Yeri protests, a very stern voice coming out of a very small body. She looks exactly like her mother.

Sooyoung glares at Chad. “Well with the way you smell we should be called Garbage.”

Some of the kids laugh. Jeongyeon lets out small bursts of forced giggles and Sooyoung worries that she possibly drove her to insanity.

The short eighth grader tugs one more time. “Garbage... *Thunder*. ” Yeri is once again pointing finger guns.

“Sure,” Sooyoung says monotonously, sick of the feeling of her shirt being tugged and willing to compromise on this one. “If that will get us to the finish line.”

Yeri fist pumps at her response as they approach the final round on the grassy field.

A giant obstacle course is laid out horizontally so the crowd in the bleachers can see inside. Lively pop music is blaring from the speakers as they walk onto the football field, Sooyoung strutting in front with Yeri at her heel, the rest of the kids looking half-dead behind her. Sooyoung’s eyes roll so far back into her head when she sees that Jinsol is already there, stretching with her team.

“Unfuckingbelievable.” Sooyoung mumbles under her breath. She has to look at the audience, because the sight of Jinsol being so playful with her team makes her physically unwell.

She scans the crowd of students and sees all the colors of the other teams she faced throughout the

day sitting on the bleachers. She finds Seulgi's team sitting, excitedly waiting for the round to start, but finds no sign of Hyejoo or her little friend.

And once again, Sooyoung's heart sinks at the absence of her child. Her brows furrow in confusion at the foreign emotion, but she quickly shakes her head to snap herself out of it. Regardless of Hyejoo being there or not, she *will* be the winner of this competition. She *will* beat Jinsol.

And maybe, just maybe, Hyejoo will admire her the way she used to.

"LIVE FROM NEW YORK, IT'S SATURDAY NIGHT-" Haseul screams loudly into her megaphone on a Tuesday afternoon in Southern California. Jinsol and her team are now standing next to Sooyoung's, and the crowd hushes in confusion. "Um. Welcome to the final round of Field Day!" Haseul dabs stiffly, and holds it for at least four whole seconds.

Despite Haseul's immense awkwardness, the crowd erupts into cheerful screams and celebration.

"This year's final round will be held between The Sharks," Jinsol and her entire team clap their arms high above their heads once to form a fin.

Sooyoung makes a facial expression like she just smelled rotten cheese.

"And the... Um... The..." Haseul looks over at Sooyoung who opens her mouth to speak before she's cut off.

"GARBAGE THUNDER!" Yeri yells.

Haseul smiles and turns back to the crowd. "Garbage Thunder!"

The crowd claps, and Yeri waves at the crowd, acting like she's on a red carpet.

"Garbage Thunder?" Jinsol snorts. "What kind of name is that?" She says low enough for only Sooyoung at her side to hear.

"At least it's original. Unlike your stupid team."

Jinsol turns to squint at her opponent square in the face. "Okay first of all, we picked this name because it symbolizes something. Sharks are fierce marine animals but are actually quite harmless, but they do what they need to do to survive."

"Are you finished PETA?" Sooyoung retorts, cutting Jinsol off.

"Okay guys, listen up for the rules! This obstacle course is a relay race consisting of several different sections. First, the bouncy tunnel, then, under the inflatable bars. Then, squeezing through the stand up dummies. After that, you have to make it over the hurdles to get to the rock climbing wall. Once up the wall, proceed to the slide and come down and back around to tag the next person on your team. Don't think about cheating, because Ms. Chungha is the ref! And last but not least, there's a catch!" Haseul says excitedly and everyone looks at her with curiosity.

"The team leaders get to participate! They will be placed behind their last member to complete the race! Whichever team's leader slides down to the ground first wins!"

The crowd cheers and Jinsol looks at Sooyoung, who smirks at her confidently. Although Jinsol is ready to fight 'til the death, Sooyoung is looking at her like she's already won.

Instead, Jinsol turns to her team. "Hey everyone, listen up." The Sharks immediately obey, and

come closer towards her as she beckons them to huddle up.

“We made it guys. We made it to the championship!” Her kids cheer enthusiastically. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. Get in, get out.”

“Like a B and E,” Yeojin says, self-assured.

“Um, well,” Jinsol doesn’t really know if their situation is analogous to breaking and entering. “Sure. Exactly.” She continues. “So we’re gonna do our thing, and we’re gonna win this! But even in the extremely unlikely scenario that we don’t... I just want to let each and every one of you know,” Jinsol says, making eye contact with all of her eighth graders. “That I’m really proud of you.” She meets Choerry’s eyes. Even though she may not be on the best terms with her mom right now, Choerry can’t help but smile at her, and Jinsol smiles back endearingly.

Meanwhile, a few feet away, Sooyoung attempts to hype up her team. “Okay guys, you know the drill. Let’s break on three. One, two, three,”

“WIN OR DIE!” The red-clad kids gutturally yell in unison.

Once the teams are lined up and ready to go, Haseul steps in front of them with a small flag.

“ON YOUR MARKS! GET SET! *GO!*”

There was no way this race should be this close.

Statistically, Jinsol’s team is vastly better when it came to teamwork, confidence, and composite athleticism. But Sooyoung was yelling like a maniac, and it made her kids act like a colossal spider was running after them. (I mean, seriously. Jinsol didn’t even know kids could run that fast.)

Choerry, the only kid left in front of Jinsol just got tagged to go. A few seconds later, that *Chad* boy gets tagged on the opposite team. Jinsol thinks some cheering should help motivate her daughter.

“WHO ARE WE?” Jinsol shouts.

“OCEAN ROYALTY!” The rest of her team responds with energetic, youthful energy.

“PLEASE KILL ME!”

Jinsol looked over to Sooyoung who just shouted that in response, rhyming with their chant.

“Real mature!” Jinsol says.

“I don’t know, it was kinda funny Dr. Kim. Mrs. Ha got bars.” Yeojin said, untying her hair and laying on the grass, being out of breath from having just ran through the course.

Jinsol sighs and continues focusing on the inflatable contraption of the private school’s Field Day in front of her. After a while, she sees her daughter sliding down and sprinting around the corner as the song “FUN!” by fromis_9 begins over the speakers. Her team starts screaming louder - but suddenly, the other team is doing so as well. Sure enough, Chad is sprinting down the side of the course at full speed, practically neck and neck with his girlfriend.

“GO MOM GO!” Choerry exclaims as she tags her mother and Jinsol takes off, Sooyoung soon following close behind.

Jinsol's throat burns with how heavy she's breathing, but she quickly cruises through the tunnel and was now finishing under the bars. She sees Sooyoung in the corner of her eye just barely making it out of the tunnel.

Jinsol was squeezing through the inflatable dummies when she heard Sooyoung struggling behind her.

So much for those workout quotes huh?

Jinsol gets through the hurdles easily and is over halfway up the rock wall when Sooyoung starts climbing.

Despite the sweat dripping down her forehead, Jinsol is excited. I mean, she *is* moments away from besting the woman who's had it out for her for ten years. Pizza party aside, the look on Sooyoung's face when she wins is about to be the biggest prize of them all.

Jinsol can't be more than two steps away from the top when Sooyoung says it.

"This rock piece I'm holding onto... It kind of looks like that birthmark Jungeun has on her inner thigh, right?"

Slowly, then all at once, the joyful music muffles in Jinsol's ringing ears as her heart plummets directly into her stomach. She can suddenly feel how much oxygen is being deprived from her body.

And in its place - anger. Sheer, overflowing anger.

"*WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU SAY?*" Jinsol growls as she turns to look down at Sooyoung, but at a cost. She loses her footing. Jinsol's foot slips, and panic overcomes her as she falls all the way to the bottom.

Her entire body slams onto the mattress below her.

From Jinsol's team to Sooyoung's, from the faculty and volunteers to every student in the audience - no one can believe their eyes.

Jinsol looks up from her haze to see Sooyoung reach the top of the rock climbing wall. As she watches Sooyoung disappear down the slide, Jinsol's face burns red with rage.

Jinsol has no choice but to climb back up the wall, and she goes down the slide in complete silence. She sees her and Sooyoung's astonished teams behind the finish line. Haseul is in front of them holding a plastic medal as Sooyoung stands next to her. She looks straight at Jinsol, with a hand on her hip, and tilting her head, giving the other mom the most smug look she has *ever* seen plastered on her face.

"Well there is a clear winner here!" Haseul reaches for Sooyoung's hand to throw up as the victor.

And at the sight, Jinsol comes undone.

The way Sooyoung has treated her all day. Hell, the way Sooyoung's been treating her for the past *month*. Sure, she hasn't been a saint to her either. But she had good reason.

And she was reminded by Sooyoung herself *exactly* what that reason was.

"The winner of Field Day is--"

Haseul doesn't even finish her sentence before Jinsol punches Sooyoung in the nose.

Hyejoo packs her backpack at her locker next to Chaewon.

The raven-haired eighth grader had honestly a great time playing on Team Banana throughout the day, especially since Chaewon was by her side the entire time.

She was planning on spectating at the final round, until she found out who was competing in it. Hyejoo didn't really want to witness her mother being a psycho in front of the whole school, so she and Chaewon just skipped it to eat some leftover snacks in the empty gym.

Now it was almost time for school to be out, so they both figured they would pack up early before the varsity sports team rush comes flooding in. To their surprise though, it was 3:00pm, and not a single person had come inside yet.

"That's a bit weird right?" Hyejoo asks Chaewon after mentioning it, but all Chaewon does is shrug.

Chaewon's phone pings and she examines the screen. Hyejoo peeks over to look too.

@tupacs_daughter started a live video. Watch it before it ends!

"Why is Yeojin going live?" Hyejoo questions.

"She probably has her clown outfit on like she always does. What's new." Both girls laugh. Chaewon taps on the notification anyway.

"HASHTAG MILF SMACKDOWN. THESE HOT MOMS ARE GOING CRAZY! OH SHIT!"

Yeojin screams from Chaewon's screen. Yeojin flips the front camera, and Hyejoo can make out a blonde woman in blue flinging her arms aggressively at a tall brunette woman who can barely hold her off, and she's wearing-

"Oh my god," Hyejoo says, seeing the bright red shirt. "That's my fucking mom."

Choerry just wants to cry watching her mom pummel Hyejoo's mom into the ground while the entire student body comes out to scream and record the fight.

Honestly, the only reason she wasn't crying was because she was scared the information might get to Nayeon, who would ruthlessly make fun of her for crying. Nayeon wasn't even there, she had faked sick because 'Field Day is for losers.'

Nevertheless, Choerry refuses to let herself cry. Presidents don't cry in front of their people - but that's really hard to remember as she watches her mother sock the other woman in the face again and again.

Choerry sees Hyejoo and Chaewon rush out of the school doors and onto the football field. Hyejoo looks absolutely mortified. Choerry doesn't blame her.

"Ladies. Hahaha... ladies, uhhh please stop." Principal Haseul was saying calmly into her megaphone at the women destroying each other on the grass, clearly wanting to stop it but not at the expense of getting herself physically involved.

“Haha okay um... Let’s stop now... The children are watching... Like the whole school is here,” Haseul says nervously, and indeed, the entire student body of St. Jihyo’s Presidential Academy was now outside and crowded around the smackdown.

Apparently, that didn’t matter to Jinsol Kim and Sooyoung Ha. The latter had regained her form and decked Jinsol in the face from under her, switching their position and pulling at Jinsol’s hair to hold her down as she punches her over and over again in the gut. Jinsol is able to throw her off and get up on two feet. The blonde grabs Sooyoung by her long ponytail only to slam her entire body onto the hard slide.

“Guys come on... The slide is a rental.” Haseul said weakly again, her words not making any sort of impact at all.

“Can *someone* please stop them?” Hyejoo yells from the bottom of the bleachers.

“Um.” Haseul says through the megaphone right as Sooyoung gets another punch in, hitting Jinsol square in the jaw.

“THIS HAS TO BE A JOKE.”

Heads turn to see Irene, in slippers and pajamas, walking angrily towards the brawling mothers.

“Oh thank God. We have a situation.” Haseul says, still speaking into the megaphone. “Where were you Renie?”

“She was taking a stress nap,” Seulgi says, standing to prevent her wife from entering the fight. “She, um. Has a hard time when she loses.” Seulgi whispers that last part.

Seulgi looks back at her wife, anger practically steaming out of her head. “Ahh! Don’t worry honey! I got this, you just sit.”

Choerry cringes watching Mrs. Kang try to get between her mom and Mrs. Ha.

“Hey guys um, you should probably like stop-”

Sooyoung grabs Jinsol by the shoulders and pushes her with all her strength back to the ground, lightly bumping Seulgi in the process.

“THAT IS *IT!* I’VE *HAD IT!*” Irene shrieks suddenly, louder than Principal Haseul’s megaphone can even go. Every child in the audience goes dead silent.

At the sound of the PTA President’s voice, the two mothers immediately cease their actions. Irene makes sure that her wife is okay, then looks over at the disheveled, bruised and breathless women on the floor.

“PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE. NOW!” Irene screams at them both. “AND BRING YOUR KIDS TOO!”

“What in the world was *that?*” Irene hisses from Principal Haseul’s chair.

Haseul is pacing back and forth behind her. Sooyoung and Jinsol were sitting absolutely unkempt in the chairs opposite of them, their kids seen from the window waiting outside in the hallway.

“Yeah, what in the world was that?” Haseul says from behind her, attempting to match Irene’s

tone.

“You are acting like children.” Irene bites.

“CHILDREN!” Haseul repeats.

Sooyoung takes a deep breath. “Well, don’t children get three strikes?”

Irene abruptly slams a clenched fist on the table. “I DON’T GIVE A *FUCK* ABOUT THREE STRIKES. YOU’RE GROWN ASS ADULTS. THE ENTIRE SCHOOL WATCHED YOU TWO FIGHT LIKE CHILDREN. IF YOU EVER DO ANYTHING LIKE THAT AGAIN I WILL BAN YOU FROM *EVER* SETTING FOOT IN THIS *FUCKING* SCHOOL *EVER AGAIN*.”

“Wh-” Jinsol begins to say.

“THAT’S STRIKE TWO!” Haseul asserts confidently from behind Irene.

“You two need to be held responsible for your actions.” Irene says, calming down and pulling out her phone.

Jinsol speaks this time. “No offense... but what are *you* going to do? Call our moms?”

Irene stands from the chair. “No,” she says easily. She walks around to sit on the edge of the desk, and looks down at them with a smile and narrowed eyes. “I’m calling your wives.”

Both of the CEOs’ eyes widen in horror.

“Please, no...” Sooyoung begs as Jinsol buries her face in her hands. “Please *do not* call my wife I have a car I can just leave-”

“*OH WE’RE CALLING YOUR WIVES!*” Haseul exclaims loudly from behind the desk. She can finally get back to her comfy chair now that Irene isn’t sitting in it.

“Haseul, please...” Irene’s smile fades as she brings her fingers up to rub at her temples. “Just let me handle this... *OH WE’RE CALLING YOUR WIVES.*” Irene shouts, “And you’re not going anywhere until they sign you out.” Irene is going through her contacts, flips her phone around, and taps on a name Sooyoung can see all too clearly.

Jiwoo Ha

“Irene... please...” Sooyoung begs weakly, and Jinsol is a bit alarmed from behind her hands. She doesn’t know how anyone could possibly be scared of Jiwoo of all people, but the blonde guesses she’s about to find out. “She can’t sign me out... she’s in... East... Dakota, she’s asleep right now,” she lies. “IRENE PLEASE-”

Irene holds up a finger and glares at Sooyoung while putting the phone up to her ear. After a few seconds Sooyoung can hear her bubbly wife answer on the other end.

“Hi Irene!” Sooyoung looks like she’s about to cry at the sound of Jiwoo’s happy, lovable voice, ready to be let down. “How did Field Day go today? Sooyoungie did well in my place I assume?”

“Hi Jiwoo! Sorry to bother you. Um, actually...” Irene shifts her tone and Sooyoung is forced to just sit and cringe as Irene explains the entirety of her actions to her wife, all up to the point where she begged Irene not to call her.

There is a long silence after Irene finishes. Irene shoots a pointed look to a terrified Sooyoung as

the taller woman squeezes her eyes shut in shame. “I see.” Jiwoo says coolly on the other end.

“I suppose I can let her go after the call ends, since you’re out of town.” Irene says into the phone.

“No,” Jiwoo says leisurely. “Keep Sooyoung there another hour.”

“*What?*” Sooyoung says, panicking in her seat.

“You heard her.” Irene says.

“BABY?” Sooyoung desperately cries out.

“THAT’S STRIKE THREE!” Haseul exclaims back.

“*Shut-*” Irene looks at Haseul with narrowed eyes, and sighs. “Thanks Jiwoo. Again, so sorry I had to bother you.”

“Oh no problem Irene. I’m just so sorry she had to ruin the day,” Jiwoo says in a tone of pure disappointment that twists Sooyoung’s insides.

She ends the call. “And now, for you.” She looks at Jinsol and taps **Jungeun Kim**. But Jinsol can’t see because her hands are still covering her face.

Jinsol actually hides her face the entire time the PTA president is on the phone with her wife.

Sooyoung is allowed to sit with Hyejoo in the cold hallway until the babysitter arrives.

Of course, not without Irene’s intense supervision.

“I’m not going to do anything, warden,” She snaps at Irene who’s standing a few inches away from Sooyoung. She doesn’t respond, and is acting like a maximum security prison guard.

Jinsol and her daughter were back inside the office. Haseul didn’t think the moms should be in the same room and, for once, Irene agreed with her.

Sooyoung, reflecting on her actions like one does when detained, had no idea why she said what she did during the obstacle course. In all honesty, she maybe felt a teensy bit bad about saying it. But if she hadn’t, she would have lost. And she hadn’t nearly busted a lung and popped a vein just to let it go to waste.

But *fuck*, could that bitch throw a punch.

She looks under the ice pack over her eye at her daughter sitting next to her, who also refuses to interact with her.

“Um.” Sooyoung clears her throat. She feels compelled to say something, although she’s not quite sure what that thing is. (Or, she does, but she’s just too proud to say it.) “At least... at least you get to go home before me?” Sooyoung says softly.

As if on cue, Hyunjin the babysitter bursts through the school doors.

“OLIVIAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! LET’S GO GIRLIE GIIIIIRL!” She yells, energetic as ever.

“I fucking hate you.”

Hyejoo gets up to walk out of the school doors with Hyunjin trailing behind her.

Sooyoung tries her best to convince herself that her bruised body was the cause of the tears welling up in her eyes.

But all Sooyoung can think about is how her daughter said those words looking not at Hyunjin at all. Her child was looking at her.

It's about 5PM when Jungeun finally arrives from work to sign Jinsol out. When the blonde CEO and her daughter get the call from inside the principal's office, they're told Jungeun is waiting for them outside.

Jinsol has had a pretty counterproductive day as is. All she wanted was a day devoted to bonding with her daughter, but all she did was surely make everything worse. And to top it all off, she had plenty of bruises forming and most likely two black eyes on the way. But she's happy to finally see her wife.

Choerry walks far in front of her mother to the school building's doors. She hadn't even looked Jinsol in the eye, let alone said a single word to her mother since her fight with Sooyoung on the field.

Afternoon sunlight warms Jinsol's skin as she exits the air-conditioned school building behind Choerry. Jinsol watches her daughter sprint into her other mother's arms.

Choerry wraps Jungeun in a hug; Jungeun is tired, but leans down a little to return her daughter's embrace. "I missed you so much mommy," Choerry says into the crook of her neck, muffled.

"Hey... I missed you too," Jungeun says softly, then crinkles her nose. "You stink." She pulls away to look at Choerry. "I need you to go home with mom now, okay?"

"No," Choerry pleads a bit quietly, but Jinsol hears, the intense refusal feeling a million times worse than Sooyoung's punches to the gut. "I... I don't want-"

"I have to work baby, I'm sorry," Jungeun says sympathetically.

"Can I come with you? Please?" Choerry begs.

"No, no Choerry I'm gonna be late. Just get in the car." Jungeun insists.

Choerry takes a dramatic sigh and slowly turns back around to face Jinsol with an unhappy expression.

Jinsol doesn't really know what to say. So, she just fishes her car keys out of her purse and hands them to Choerry. Her daughter walks towards the Tesla to go ahead and wait for her mother inside.

Jinsol manages to look up from the floor to her wife. "So... you're going to be late...?" Jinsol asks, nervously.

Jungeun says nothing. Jinsol looks back at the ground, afraid and ashamed.

"I had to leave a presentation with the CEO to come get you." Jungeun says bitterly.

Jinsol is struck with another overwhelming wave of guilt. "Jungeun..." Jungeun just looks at her, irritated and exhausted. "I'm sorry."

Only silence follows.

“I’ll... see you at home, then?”

“Probably not.” Jungeun answers, so distant that her eyes look disconnected from her face. “We rescheduled for 8pm. I have to stay late now.”

Before Jinsol can think of something to say, Jungeun is walking back to the driver’s side of her BMW. Jinsol raises her hand to stop her, to find something, *anything* to say, but what could she?

And before Jinsol knows it, Jungeun is backing out of the parking spot, and driving away.

With a heavy heart, Jinsol goes back to get into her car, Choerry already comfortable in the backseat with her airpods in.

Jinsol looks to the rear view mirror and sees that Choerry is looking straight out the window to completely prevent any sort of communication with her mother. But for the first time that day, Jinsol doesn’t mind.

Choerry won’t have to see her cry.

Chapter End Notes

Wow. That was long, wasn’t it? But hopefully you all enjoyed it?

Really curious, who are your guys’ favorite characters? Tell us and your favorite parts below!

- curiouscat.me/catmsdqna

We love you! <3

- Cat

not cat saying we love you like bitch maybe if yall streamed birthday by somi i’d love you... -daniela

Haunted Housing

Chapter Notes

None of you matter to me except the people who livetweet the chapters and leave long comments JK everyone who supports our fic has a special place in my heart <3 but livetweeting readers and detailed commenters i'd really fr take a bullet for you just give me a time and place - Cat

god we get it cat u want the readers to hype us up... turn it down a bit you're ruining my image. -daniela

p.s. stream icy and only by irene <3

p.p.s. CAT IS LITERALLY SPELL CHECKING MY NOTES. THIS IS SICK.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Three weeks have passed since what the St. Jihyo's student body and 115 million viewers refer to as the "Milf Smackdown."

Yeojin took the liberty of posting her recording of the brawling mothers on every streaming platform imaginable - YouTube, WorldStar Hip Hop, Soundcloud as an audio file, Pornhub, and the list goes on. "Milf Smackdown" became an international household name within five days.

Fortunately enough for Dr. Jinsol Kim and Sooyoung Ha, the fight footage was captured at far too great a distance to clearly make out their identities. However, the CEO of Yves St. Laurent ruthlessly hounded her PR team to have the video expunged from the internet at all costs. Yeojin, under the elusive faceless profile "Lil Peni\$", received plentiful authoritative emails from officials angrily threatening a multi-million dollar defamation lawsuit - all of which the dwarf-like eighth grader cackled at and ignored.

At work, Sooyoung was hellbent on finding, suing, and killing Lil Peni\$. At home, she was experiencing the silent treatment - from both her daughter and her wife. Hyejoo acted like her mother was completely dead to her, for obvious reasons. Jiwoo, on the other hand, was out filming for the two weeks after the incident, and didn't bother to call her wife at all for the first one.

And when the celebrity wife finally arrived back home, she reduced their physical contact to none. But every morning, Jiwoo still continued her routine of leaving a packed lunch with a heart-signed note for her wife, which was enough to put the CEO at ease. Sooyoung figured she can just wait this one out. After all, she knows Jiwoo can't resist her forever.

Jiwoo herself has currently just arrived home from work on this year's warm Halloween afternoon. Following faint, familiar hums of old Korean jazz, she climbs one of their long black staircases to the roof.

And on their house's crown sits Sooyoung, in the dry, elevated center of their infinity pool.

The Ha's roof itself is uniquely unconventional. Polished circular stones of smooth obsidian rise from the water as a walking path to the gathering area in the center of the water. There, two thin seating cushions opposite each other can host about five on each side, united by a small table in the middle that Sooyoung is currently using for a steamed giant dungeness crab. The CEO stares out

introspectively to her postcard view of Los Angeles as the sun shines above her.

“Welcome home my queen!” Sooyoung sing-songs with a proud smile upon seeing Jiwoo lift her dress to cross the water on the polished stones.

Jiwoo just rolls her eyes. Sooyoung has been trying to get on her good side again for weeks. On the other hand, Jiwoo over the course of those weeks has been trying to initiate a serious talk with her wife about her parenting, but Sooyoung has been too busy for a sit down.

But now, here she is, home early and unoccupied.

The CEO opens her arms wide, with a big kiss-up smile for her wife, who now stands in front of her. “No,” Jiwoo rejects, and walks to the edge of the platform where Sooyoung’s \$8,000 vintage record player sits. (Well, formerly \$8,000, before she got it painted in liquid gold.) She lifts the needle to pause her wife’s old Korean record. “I need to talk to you.”

Sooyoung tuts and grumbles an “Ughhh.”

“Okay!” Jiwoo answers passive-aggressively. “I’ll just go-”

“No! Noooo, don’t go,” Sooyoung pouts, and reaches to wrap her arms around Jiwoo and gently pull her into her lap. “I want you here...” she corrects, “I just don’t want to talk...” Sooyoung slowly leans in closer to give her beloved a much-missed kiss.

Before Sooyoung can connect their lips though, her eyes shoot open at the sensation of Jiwoo stuffing a lobster biscuit into her mouth. The taller woman yelps into the bread, while her wife doesn’t look like she regrets doing it at all.

“*Jiwurr!*” she cries out, muffled, and she pauses to take the biscuit out of her mouth. “You know I don’t eat carbs.”

Jiwoo narrows her eyes. “Why was that on your plate then...?”

“It came with the meal.” Sooyoung responds grimly, referring to the assortment prepared by one of their private chefs available anytime upon request.

Jiwoo doesn’t look amused.

“When are you gonna stop being mad at me?” Sooyoung pouts, and wraps her arms affectionately around her wife in her lap, as if all of Jiwoo’s resistance is a colossal overreaction.

“Sooyoung. You destroyed another mother in front of hundreds of children. You beat up *Jinsol*, our friend, of all people.”

“Mmm, she’s not my friend,” Sooyoung interjects, like a petty teenager. “And you’re right, I did destroy her didn’t I?”

“*Sooyoung.*”

“Okay, okay. But I’ve got an army working to get the video taken down. It’ll be gone in no time,” the CEO says with her casual airy voice.

“That’s not the point.” Jiwoo responds firmly. She reaches to take Sooyoung’s arms and remove them from her waist, but stays in her lap. “Our daughter watched you turn into some barbarian in front of her entire school, and now the world. Do you know how humiliating that must be for her?”

All because you're so immature?"

Jiwoo doesn't wait for a response. She reaches for Sooyoung's phone on the glass table, unlocks it, and opens the YouTube app. She taps the Trending section, and shows the screen to her wife.

#1: Milf Smackdown (uploaded by Lil Peni\$)

#2: ASMR Dentist RolePlay Emergency Cleaning Teeth in Public (uploaded by Chuu)

"First of all," Jiwoo starts quite aggressively. "You're blocking me from my rightful place at the top."

"Please princess, if anyone can top you it's me," Sooyoung smirks, shamelessly looking directly into her wife's eyes.

Jiwoo ignores the ignited flame between her legs and continues with an irritated huff. "SECONDLY," she says, perhaps a little too high-pitched.

"Ugh, I love crab," Sooyoung blurts randomly, and grabs the giant cooked crustacean by its sides and harshly bangs it on the table's edge to break its gleaming red shell.

(How hypocritical it is that Sooyoung ridicules Jinsol for having a little pasta sauce on her face, yet the elegant goddess herself eats like a primitive ape-human when no one else is around.)

"Why." Jiwoo breathes in disbelief, lightly shaking her head. "There is a hammer. Right in front of you."

"I am stronger than any hammer, ever." Her wife hums, ripping apart the giant shell roughly, letting the savory aromas spill into the air.

"That's hot." Jiwoo mutters under her breath.

"What?"

"I said *secondly*. Have you even apologized to our daughter since you decided to become a YouTube sensation too?"

The silence is telling enough for the celebrity, who breaks away in disappointment and begins to get up and leave. "Jiwoo, Jiwoo," Sooyoung pleads, reaching to take her hand.

"You are so difficult." Jiwoo snaps, and yanks her hand away.

"No need to get... crabby! Haha," Sooyoung jokes, pointing both her wet index fingers at her wife who glares at her with an absolutely irritated straight face. Sooyoung pouts at the lack of response.

"That joke would be funny if you got the animal right." Jiwoo retorts.

Sooyoung looks up at Jiwoo, absolutely puzzled. "What... What do you think that is- Okay anyway..." She sighs. "Tell me what I can do." She responds in a soft, honeyed voice.

Really though, Jiwoo is exacerbated by the fact that all Sooyoung wants to do is make her pleased again instead of be a better parent.

"It's Halloween," the celebrity says dryly. "You can start by taking your child trick-or-treating. It's been a hot minute since you've done that."

“Sweetheart...” Sooyoung through her loud chewing of crab meat, looking out into the distance. “I still don’t know what’s the big deal. My parents never took me trick-or-treating, and I turned out fine!” She says matter-of-factly, electing to ignore the conglomerate of diverse childhood traumas that will forever manifest in her mind.

“You *hate* your parents.” Jiwoo says, for every terrible reason that they both know, but choose to leave unspoken. “...So why do you insist on treating our daughter the same way they treated you?”

Ouch.

Now *that* one hurt.

Sooyoung stops eating to clench her jaw in silence, refusing to look her wife in the eye. Jiwoo observes the change in demeanor, and feels her heart pang with guilt knowing she’s rubbed salt in her wife’s most sensitive wound. Maybe that accusation was far too heavy.

Jiwoo slowly tucks her dress behind her legs and sits next to her wife, who doesn’t push her away.

“You can try harder with her.” Jiwoo whispers, resting a hand on her shoulder. “You’re better than them, Sooyoungie.” A light squeeze, as Jiwoo thinks about the enormous heart surely inside the woman she married. “I know you are.” And she means it.

Sooyoung says nothing, her expression unreadable. Jiwoo looks to her patiently. After a few moments, Sooyoung closes her eyes, and raises a fishy wet hand to rest on her wife’s.

The moment is interrupted by the sound of increasingly loud footsteps coming up the stairs. Hyejoo peeks her head out onto the watery roof to look over at her moms.

“Hi sweetie!” Jiwoo greets, simultaneously giving her wife’s shoulder another two squeezes.

“Hey mom,” the pre-teen responds in her usual indifferent tone of voice. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sorry sweetie, I feel a mad poop coming on right now,” Jiwoo lies, and begins to walk out of the central gathering area to re-enter their house. She doesn’t actually need to use the bathroom at all, but she’s going to leave this one to her wife.

“But- wait...” Hyejoo pouts, then looks back at her other mother in her pretentious crab bib like she’s chopped liver. Like hell does she want to have any conversation with her after Field Day. “Um.”

“Yes...” The CEO hesitates. “*Sweetie*,” she hoarses out, so awkwardly that they both cringe in disgust.

“I know this is last minute but can I go haunted housing tonight?”

“What is that? Trick-or-treating?”

“No. Trick-or-treating is for babies.” Hyejoo says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, as she walks across the water to get closer to her mother. “My friends and I want to go together to some haunted houses that are open tonight.”

“Okay,” Sooyoung agrees, despite not fully understanding what it is her daughter is trying to participate in. “I’ll drive you.”

“Wow, decided to be a good mom for Halloween?” Hyejoo retorts venomously without skipping a beat.

“TCH- *Listen*,” Sooyoung growls. “Let me drive you,” she says, softer. Hyejoo looks at her like that’s the last thing she’d ever want.

A pregnant pause, as the two look at each other, distant across the water. “It’s the least I can do.” Sooyoung adds quietly.

It’s probably the closest thing that her prideful maniac of a mother will get to an apology, Hyejoo thinks to herself, and maybe just with a ten-millionth of her being she appreciates the sentiment. But still, she’d rather not have the star of Milf Smackdown around her classmates ever again.

“No, no, it’s okay. Um. I just needed the permission. We... already have... a driver.” Hyejoo lies. She came up there hoping her other mother could drive them. Her friends always loved being around the celebrity, and she was very fun with them, too. Last time, Jiwoo did violent donuts with her car in a Costco parking lot, and then let Yeojin drive.

“Mrs... Mrs. Ummm...” Hyejoo racks her brain for any name, but is suddenly blanking out. So she goes with the first one that comes up in her head. “Mrs. Kim.” Hyejoo fights the urge to facepalm at her mistake. Choerry wasn’t even invited to be coming with them in the first place.

Adrenaline shoots through Sooyoung’s body at her daughter’s mention of Jinsol. “*Excuse me?!?*”

“THE OTHER ONE.” Hyejoo barks. “Auntie Jungeun! Jungeun Kim.”

“JUNGEUN?” They both around to identify the source of Jiwoo’s abrupt outburst. Didn’t she just leave? Wasn’t she supposed to be inside the house by now? Her voice was coming from the outdoor staircase.

Slowly, Jiwoo reappears in sight, climbing back up the staircase. “I love Jungeun.” she says full of emotion, with a hand to her heart like it’s the Pledge of Allegiance. And then, without another word, the celebrity turns back around and leaves again.

“Umm, okay-” Sooyoung nods trustingly at the plan. “Okay. As long as it’s not the other one,” she says the last three words full of distaste.

“Thanks.” Hyejoo says awkwardly, and turns to leave.

“Wait-”

Hyejoo stops to turn back to her CEO mother.

There’s a million things and more that Sooyoung could use this moment to say. She opens her mouth for the words. But looking into her daughter’s eyes, it’s just too hard.

“If you... If you need anything else, just ask me.”

“Okay...” The eighth grader says at the unfamiliar offer.

“And be safe.”

Hyejoo nods. “Okay.” And then, she’s bounding down the stairs back into their house, leaving Sooyoung to her crab.

The CEO takes a deep breath, and leans back over to resume the playing of her record.

“OLIVIA? HI!”

Hyejoo winces as the strident voice of her art partner blasts in her ear from her phone speaker.

“Choerry... Hey.” The raven-haired child pinches the bridge of her nose in stress. Somehow, she has to convince Choerry to take her and her friends out haunted housing later tonight. Under any other set of circumstances, she wouldn’t be this desperate. But it was either this, or another weird escort with Principal Haseul where she tries to act like she was their friend.

Hyejoo was ready to get on her knees.

“I know it’s random but... Do you um, have... Plans tonight already?” The eighth grader asks the girl, biting her nails.

“Uhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” It’s about the longest ‘uh’ Hyejoo has ever heard. “I was planning to go to Nayeon’s tonight for her Halloween party, why?” Choerry asks. Hyejoo already feels her hopes plummet.

“Oh um. We were just going to go haunted housing tonight in our costumes and...” Hyejoo winces. She hopes this’ll be okay with the gang. “Do you wanna come with us?”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line. “You guys want me to hang out with you?” Choerry asks quietly, in disbelief.

Hyejoo feels herself getting embarrassed. What was she thinking? Why would Choerry turn down a party with a bunch of the popular kids to make her mom drive them around the entire night? What she doesn’t know is that Choerry is so happy at the random miracle that she can barely speak.

“YES!” The bubbly girl shouts into the phone.

“What?” Hyejoo can’t believe her ears.

“YES! I WOULD LOVE TO! And I can drive you guys too!” Choerry says, eager to please. “But, only if you guys want!”

Hyejoo *really* can’t believe her ears. She didn’t even need to ask!

“Um?! Wow! Yes, that would be great Choerry, thanks- Wait, what about your party?”

“Eh, her parties are...” Choerry trails off, feeling a bit ashamed to finish the sentence out loud. *Not fun*. “Plus, I want to dress up! I have my costume but Nayeon said it was lame, so I wasn’t going to wear it. But now I’ll get to!”

“Okay!” Hyejoo says, upbeat for once. “Pick us all up whenever after eight? Yeri and I are at our own houses, but Yeojin is with Chae at her house.”

“Yay! Fun! Text the addys and I’ll put them in my GPS.” Choerry squeals excitedly and Hyejoo raises her brows with a laugh. “I’ll see you soon!” With that, Choerry hangs up.

Well, Hyejoo thinks. That was a lot easier than I thought.

“HUMP ME! FUCK ME!”

Haseul cringes in the driver's seat as the piercing cries of the song blare through her car speakers.

Yejin nods along silently to the beat in shotgun, with an appreciative, contemplative expression akin to an avid Christian witnessing a passionate sermon.

"DADDY BETTA' MAKE ME CHOKE. HUMP ME! FUCK ME! MY TUNNEL LOVES A DEEP THROAT."

"Sweetie, can we please change this," Haseul asks her daughter politely, who is currently in charge of the music.

"What! Mom this is CupcakKe!" Yeojin exclaims, and cranks up the volume. *"Lick, lick, lick lick, I wanna eat, yo' dick."* The child raps along with a deep voice, as they drive follow the GPS through the next suburban town over from their own. *"But I can't fuck up my nails, so Imma pick it up with chopsticks."*

Haseul was on her way to drop her daughter off for Halloween night at one of her closest friends' houses. That friend just happened to be Chaewon. Ms. Wong's daughter.

The principal's heart beats in her throat as she nervously drives to Vivi's house for the first time. There's just something thrilling about seeing her on a weekend, in an environment that isn't school - something that makes whatever exists between them, even if it's only in Haseul's daydreams, more real.

"MOUTH WIDE OPEN, MOUTH WIDE OPEN, MOUTH WIDE OPEN LIKE I WAS AT THE DENTIST," Yeojin chants demonically.

"Okay-" Haseul is simply overwhelmed with the obscenities and presses the power button of the car stereo.

"Mom!" Yeojin pouts at the new silence, hugging the duffel bag of her Halloween costume and overnight clothes close to her chest. "Come on!"

"That was egregious, Yeojin."

"Okay mom, we all know you're a *dyke* but there's no need to throw a fit. Sometimes art just needs to be looked at from the third person. She is a brave, bold, beautiful woman who is just speaking her truth."

"Alright, Oprah. I'll turn it back on if you shuffle my playlist," Haseul says leisurely, ignoring her daughter as the GPS instructs her to make a right.

Yejin groans.

"Yejin, how come you never play any of my songs anymore? That doesn't make you very much of the GOAT if you ask me." Haseul asserts casually, inserting more student vernacular she's heard in the hallways.

Yejin scrunches her face in glares in disgust, and decides she'd rather hear her mother's poor assortment of music than more of whatever the fuck that was. Reluctantly, she shuffles the playlist.

The dramatic chords of a familiar song begin to hit, and Yeojin groans. "Oh no-"

"You're beautiful, that's for sure," Nelly Furtado from the year 2000 sings through the speakers.

“OH MY GOOOOOOOOOD!” Haseul happily yells out, like she just shot some heroin, losing control and swerving the car a little. “I LOVE BRITNEY!”

Yeojin puts a hand to her mouth to stifle her reaction, and she stares at the driver in the car adjacent to them as a plea for help. Her mother only cranks the volume louder than before, continuing to sing along with a giant dorky smile as the car begins to boom in the middle of the road. Yeojin repeatedly yanks on the moving car’s child-locked door handle, but to no avail.

“Hah! Nice try, CHILD-LOCKED!” Haseul says, interrupting her performance, having learned from the last time Yeojin tried to roll out of her car in the middle of the highway.

The eighth grader is pretty sure this constitutes as child kidnapping.

As they hear the chorus building, Haseul takes rapid breaths as if charging up.

“I’M LIKE A BIIIIIIIRD, I’LL ONLY FLY AWAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!” Haseul sings at the top of her lungs. *“I DON’T KNOW WHERE MY SOUL IS, I DON’T KNOW WHERE MY HOME IS,”* Haseul whines in a voice that resembles a poor Britney Spears impression. *“AndbabyallIneedforyouto-I’M LIIIIKE A BIIIRD-”*

“CHANGE IT BEFORE I BREAK THE GLASS MOTHER!” Yeojin threatens over the boom of the bass.

“You can try! Hahaha!” Her mother giggles between lyrics, bouncing in her seat.

Yeojin suddenly opens the glove compartment to reveal a large rock the size of her head.

“Yeojin!” Haseul shrieks from her seat, as Yeojin pulls the giant rock into her lap. “WHERE DID YOU GET THAT?!”

“I’VE BEEN HAVING THIS IN HERE,” she yells over Nelly Furtado’s booming voice. “FOR EMERGENCIES!”

“OKAY, YOU CAN CHANGE IT!” Haseul yells, lowering the volume. “Play some of that ‘Party Rock’!”

“Party Rock? What are you, a hundred and five?!” Yeojin shrieks.

“WE WOULDN’T HAVE THE MUSIC WE LOVE TODAY WITHOUT PARTY ROCK!” Haseul defends.

“WE WOULDN’T HAVE THIS CAR EITHER!” Yeojin counters, referring to the fact that her mother bought their orange Kia Soul based on the singular fact that Haseul loved its commercial with anthropomorphic hamsters shuffling to “Party Rock Anthem” by L.M.F.A.O. “BUT HERE WE ARE! IN THIS FUCK ASS BOX!”

Haseul falls silent, as she continues to drive, clearly offended and now looking like a kicked puppy.

“I thought this car was cool.” The mom says sadly in a quieter voice.

Now Yeojin just feels bad, placing the rock back in the glove compartment. “Um,” the daughter says awkwardly in the front seat, looking at her mother who looks like she’s about to burst into tears behind the wheel. “Okay... Um, I guess you’re right mom. I mean, what other car can you say you’re hot-boxing and actually mean it literally.”

Haseul smiles a little at her daughter's words. "Yeah!" She says confidently. "What's hot-boxing?"

Yejin snorts, and goes through her phone to pick a new song after turning on the stereo once again. "Here, I know you like this one."

A kick drum pounds through the speakers, accompanied by a low roll of synth bass and soft humming.

"YES!" Haseul exclaims, immediately recognizing it from countless listens as "bad guy" by Billie Eilish.

Yejin sighs. "Please don't make me regret this," she mutters quietly.

"Whew, I love this song," Her mother says as the introductory beats loop. "It's so mysterious. So scandalous. I feel like such a naughty little girl." Yejin screams into her hand.

Haseul begins to sing along, softly panting out extremely unintelligible half-words because she doesn't even know the lyrics. She aggressively bobs her head, short hair swishing on beat as they're stopped at the red light.

Even though this happens every time this song comes on - no matter where they are... their car, the dressing room of a Forever 21, T.G.I. Friday's - Yejin wants to rip her eyes out in embarrassment.

"I'm that bad type, make your mama sad type, make your girlfriend mad tight, might seduce your dad type-"

"DUH!" Haseul randomly interjects.

"Too early mom! *God!*" Yejin massages her temples, exasperated because her mother can never, *ever*, for the life of her get that part right. "Look at me." The girl rasps out, as Haseul turns to face her.

"I'm the baaaaad guy..." Billie sings. Yejin waits with held breath, ready to drop a finger to signal and teach her hag of a mother when to say the lyric.

"DUH!" Haseul doesn't wait for Yejin's finger to drop, horribly offbeat.

Yejin screams and drags her face down with her hands, and Haseul just snickers and keeps driving happily at the flash of green light. "YOU CAN'T EVEN TAKE CUES!"

The GPS speaks this time, quieting the music. *"In 500 feet, you will arrive at your destination."*

Their surroundings become increasingly beautiful, as they enter a Santa Monica neighborhood with quaint detached family homes and massive hanging trees that shade the entire road.

Yejin looks out of the window to admire the peaceful, homey neighborhood where her homie resides. Although her and Chaewon have been joined at the hip for most of middle school, she'd never been to her house before. "Oh my God! Ms. Wong lives here too!" Yejin grins from ear to ear at the thought of her favorite teacher.

"Yeah," Haseul breathes, quite nervously.

"OoooOoOo," Yejin teases like a knowing schoolmate. "Miss WOoOoonG," she pokes at her driving mother, who blushes furiously and feels her heart rate speed up.

"Stop," Haseul attempts at being authoritative, but can't suppress the smile on her face no matter

how hard she tries.

“Someone’s excited,” Yeojin sneers with a wink. “What if it’s a trap house,” Yeojin snickers.

“It’s not gonna be a trap house Yeojin!” Haseul has *trap house* defined in her tween lingo chart as *a poorly kept apartment for snorting cannabis*. “Do you see how nice this neighborhood is?”

“Imagine your girl lives in a trap house,” Yeojin says, and proceeds to cackle and throw her head back.

“Arrived.”

Haseul parks the car on the curb, and scans the nearby homes for the house number that Vivi texted her. And then, she sees it.

The suburban house is petite and gorgeous, colored a soft tan and donning multicolored rose bushes that surround the walkway to the front door. It’s homey and, well, Vivi, except for one glaring, alien aspect - Haseul’s eyes widen in shock at the flashy green lamborghini parked in her driveway.

“Ms. Wong has a *lambo?!?*” Yeojin’s jaw drops in awe.

Haseul nervously gets out of her car with her daughter, and adjusts her striped white button up and her hair. And then again, three more times, like she’s going on a date as opposed to dropping her daughter off at a friend’s house for the night. Yeojin notices her mother’s overgrooming, as she climbs out onto the curb with her duffle bag and waits expectantly.

Her eighth grader smiles a little bit. “You look good, mom,” she admits tenderly. Not just to bolster her confidence, but because her mom should know it’s true.

Haseul stops, and meets her eyes to smile at her endearingly. “Thanks, sweetie.”

Haseul then pulls out two large fake eyebrows and slaps them on her forehead in a V shape. Yeojin chuckles at her mother’s sudden change in appearance, very confused, but decides against even asking her what she’s dressed up as.

The mother and daughter walk up to the house and wait on the driveway, and Haseul takes out her iPhone.

Haseul: We’re outside!

She sends a knocking minion sticker for good measure.

Vivi: Coming! :)

Haseul’s heartbeat accelerates as she takes a gulp.

She freezes at the sound of the front door opening. And there walks Vivi from around the corner, striking dark red hair flowing in the chilly afternoon breeze. Haseul feels the whole atmosphere change for the better.

“MS. WOOOONG!” Yeojin greets enthusiastically.

“Hey, Yeojin!” Vivi says with a fond smile, and Yeojin’s eyes light up.

Suddenly, Haseul doesn’t know where to put her hands, so she stuffs one stiffly in a front pocket of

her tight jeans and runs one through her hair in an attempt to look like James Dean (forgetting she has a pair of massive angry eyebrows plastered on her forehead).

Then, the art teacher's eyes meet Haseul's and smiles even more. "Hi," she says to her coworker softly, and Haseul's heart is beating in overdrive. "Yejin, you can go on inside. Chae's waiting for you in the living room!" Vivi says, and Yejin sprints in.

"I'll see you tomo- Okay..." Haseul says weakly with a laugh, and Vivi giggles.

"Happy Halloween," Vivi says, and Haseul marvels at her beauty in the setting sun. "And you are..." she questions softly, taking in Haseul's seemingly normal attire.

"Irene!" Haseul answers with a cheeky smile, pointing at the giant angry eyebrows on her forehead.

"Oh sorry, how could I have missed that," Vivi smirks, and lightly slaps Haseul's arm playfully.

WHEW! Haseul thinks to herself, feeling the blood rush to her cheeks. "This is *yours?*" The principal asks impressedly, gesturing to the lime green Lamborghini.

"No, it's actually-"

"Honey?"

Haseul's heart stops hard at the sound of a man's voice coming from Vivi's doorway.

Oh please no, please, PLEASE, Haseul begs internally, refusing to accept what she already knows is coming. She yanks off the exaggerated eyebrows, nearly ripping off her actual eyebrows in the process.

And suddenly, the owner of the voice is rounding the corner. An older Caucasian man - a sizably built one at that - wearing a white button-up shirt, a tie, and sleek black pants approaches the two women.

"Sorry I would not like to convert to mormonism?" Haseul says at him, losing all control in her brain for selective speech. She swears the joke sounded better in her head.

"What was that?" He asks with an oblivious pearly white smile. Vivi at his side, however, has her hand to her mouth to stop her incredulous, wide-eyed smile from turning into a loud laugh at Haseul's joke.

"Haseul, this is Nate, my boyfriend," Vivi swoops in with suppressed amusement, and just hearing the confirmation makes Haseul feel like someone punched her in the throat. "Nate, this is Haseul, she's the principal at work."

"Hi, I'm Haseul," she says, quickly recovering and switching to business mode and she holds out a hand to shake. "I've heard so much about you!" she supplements, to be polite. *Like when you left her without a lunch...!*

"Oh, you're Haseul! I have too, she loves you!" Nate says, and Haseul's eyes widen at Vivi. But the other woman is too busy looking at her boyfriend with a proud smile.

When Haseul shakes Nate's hand, she fights the overwhelming urge to shiver. For such a polished looking man, his hands are so rough - a touch like sandpaper with an overly strong grip to match. Haseul thinks of his calloused hands all over Vivi's soft skin, and the thought just makes her sick to her stomach.

But she's met enough unpleasant parents, children, and educators to not have perfected her fake smile. "You have a very nice car!"

"Why thank you," he replies suavely, and all too conveniently slides an arm around Vivi at the same time in a way that Haseul can't help but note is like she's apart of his collection of possessions. "It was a gift from my parents!"

Of course it was, Haseul thinks.

"Well, it's very nice to meet you Nate, but I should probably get going," Haseul says casually, deciding she's had enough of him and frankly not wanting to spend another minute in his presence. "I have to, um... get the candy ready for kids, haha."

"Awww," Vivi smiles affectionately, and Haseul does too at the sight, even if she's tucked under this man's arm.

"I'll see you at work?" The principal says. Maybe it was better at work, in their own little world. Where certain realities weren't present to taint.

Vivi nods. "I'll see you then."

"Really nice to meet you Nate," Haseul smiles once more at the boyfriend of the woman she's in love with.

"Likewise!"

Haseul starts to walk back to her car with one last "Happy Halloween!" She wants to turn back around to look at Vivi, but she'd rather not have the image of them together further cemented into her memory. All she can think about is how he sounded calling her honey, how rough his touch felt against her skin.

Talk about an afternoon gone wrong.

Vivi and Nate watch from the driveway as the other woman walks back across the street. The man hums to his girlfriend approvingly.

"I think she likes me!"

Hours later when the sun has long since set, an exhausted Jungeun is finally on her way home - not to sleep, but to take Choerry and her friends what her daughter vividly described as "haunted housing."

The CFO tried to object. Work, just as she predicted, had kept her even later than ever before. From conferences to reports, there were always suddenly a million things to do and a million of other people's problems that only she could fix. Not to mention that her daughter was asking to be out late on a Sunday night. But Choerry, to her mother's extreme irritation, had apparently already told everyone involved (and their parents) that she could provide transportation for the entire bridge of Halloween night to the morning hours of November 1st.

It didn't help that Jungeun had only gotten a single hour of sleep last night either.

She wouldn't exactly say she's in the holiday spirit.

Jungeun wished that Jinsol would just take Choerry out instead. It's not like her wife had been doing anything worthwhile over her time off so far. She and Sooyoung had been suspended from any St. Jiho's fundraisers for a month, courtesy of Irene, so Jinsol spent her days at home.

And yes, while she was fed up with her wife for becoming a viral sensation for all the wrong reasons, but she was infuriated in comparison at the fact that Jinsol had been doing nothing to help out around the house while Jungeun slaved away.

Once, - well, several times - Jungeun had asked her to take out the trash, and Jinsol didn't say no, but she kept putting it off because she was binging the entirety of the MTV show *Catfish*. (Jinsol thought the show was going to be about actual catfish, and can't deny that she was a little bit disappointed.)

But for Jungeun, it was even more stressful to keep nagging her wife to do things and return only to be disappointed. And so, she just ended up taking out the trash herself, along with the other duties in the house that, due to Jinsol's mess, accumulated with urgency but were left, for the most part, unattended to.

At this point, Jungeun had lost so much hope that she figured if she asked her wife to take Choerry tonight, she'd somehow end up doing that herself too.

Nevertheless, Jungeun would do anything for her daughter. Even if it means putting her own health on the back burner.

So the mother braces herself for the long night ahead as she drives uphill to the Pacific Ocean promontory where their home resides.

Unlike the Ha residence which was dark, shrouded in trees, and positioned high in affluent Beverly Hills to see the concrete jungle of Los Angeles below, the Kims' estate was built at the peak of a privately owned coastal cliff with a complete picture-perfect view of the ocean.

Jungeun, former champion of Stanford University's swim team, and Jinsol, one of the nation's most promising up-and-coming marine biologists, were in complete and enthusiastic agreement at the idea of living adjacent to the water. And so, not long after their marriage, the couple chose and purchased an entire promontory for them to build their castle upon. And as a plus, it came with a private beach a hundred feet below that Jinsol and Jungeun happily made their own.

Everything about their home itself was porcelain white - the building's massive exterior, the hard floor outside, the glowing encasings of the luscious plants, and more. The house, built like a sharper, more modern version of a Greek villa, when fully illuminated possessed a shine that could rival the brightest of lighthouses on the darkest of nights.

The CFO parks her BMW in their driveway behind her wife's Tesla, leaving room to pull out the luxury minivan from the garage. She exits her car, and walks towards the front door. All she needs to do is fetch Choerry and fill her coffee container to get her through the night ahead.

Jungeun enters to the chatter of the living room TV and her and Jinsol's favorite blanket on one of the couches, but no Jinsol.

"Choerry!" She calls, walking to their central staircase that spirals around a gleaming blue cylindrical fish tank.

"Coming!" Choerry responds from somewhere on the second floor.

Jungeun goes to their kitchen and approaches her best friend, the coffee machine. *Let's just get this*

over with, she thinks, as the machine slowly squirts coffee into her empty thermos.

She leans on the granite countertop, and as her eyelids feel heavier and heavier, she succumbs and lets them close. But just before she drifts away to dreamland, the muffled sounds of a flushing toilet and running sink from the bathroom nearby bring her back to her exhausted reality.

As she walks to the silver fridge to get out her coffee creamer, she sees Jinsol coming out of their bathroom in the corner of her eye.

“Hi honey,” Jinsol greets, shaking her hands dry.

“Where’s the coffee creamer?” Jungeun asks quite harshly at its absence in their fridge.

“Oh- I-”

Jinsol is interrupted by the sounds of a very excited Choerry coming down the stairs. In a glamorous, fully suited Captain Marvel costume that she made herself, she poses like a model with a big grin once she has both of her mothers’ attentions. “Like it?”

“Get the minivan keys and wait in the car,” Jungeun instructs with a sigh, and Choerry obeys, putting her airpods in and walking off to another corridor to the entrance to the garage. She doesn’t even look in her other mother’s direction. (Ever since her classmates told Choerry they saw her mother on Pornhub, the child only looks at Jinsol when she absolutely has to.)

Jungeun waits to hear the door close before she continues. “Where is the coffee creamer.”

Jinsol, in her pajamas, scratches the back of her head. “Sorry... I used it all today. But hey, since you’re going out again I figure you can get some on your way back,” she says from the living room, barely looking at her wife.

And maybe it’s the fatigue, maybe it’s the stress, maybe it’s the fact that Jinsol was perfectly capable of going out and getting the creamer herself, or maybe it’s all three and more - but behind Jungeun’s sleepy eyes, something flares.

“That’s a bit inconsiderate. Don’t you think?” Jungeun bites.

The air between them is suddenly taut with tension. Jinsol looks entirely caught off-guard. “What?”

A pause, before Jungeun lets out a scoff, her face with a wry, weak smile and narrowed eyes at her wife. “Unbelievable.”

“Sweetie...” Jinsol says calmly with concern, slowly walking across the room to the kitchen.

“No. Do not ‘sweetie’ me.” Jungeun snaps, the term of endearment only seeming to infuriate her further.

Jinsol stops in her tracks.

“You know, I thought that maybe, just *maybe* you’d pick up on some of my stuff since you’re taking time off and doing *absolutely nothing*. But I guess I was wrong! I still have to do everything, don’t I?”

Every word slices across Jinsol’s heart, as she stands, frozen from an onslaught sudden guilt. “Jungeun, I-”

"I thought you taking time off meant that you would help me too. Not just participate *only when you want to*."

Everything that has been building inside Jungeun for so long suddenly rises to the surface with every step she takes.

"For ten years Jinsol." The brunette says through clenched teeth. "Ten years. You haven't been helping me out. I'm not your fucking maid, you know."

Jinsol suddenly feels freezing cold. She doesn't know what to say - she's been spending those years increasingly working harder than ever before for her family. But she knows Jungeun has reason to be angry, and she's open to admitting she's wrong; she's open to anything except fighting her best friend, but she just needs her to calm down first. "You're not, of course you're not-"

"Well that's what you've turned me into, apparently," Jungeun continues.

Jinsol, stunned, feels her chest painfully tightening, while Jungeun is far from finished. "Well..." Jinsol starts quietly, unsure of the right words to say. "We could... get one..."

"Are you *fucking* serious Jinsol?"

"I-"

"I DON'T WANT A *FUCKING MAID!*" Jungeun shouts suddenly, tearing away every bit of peace left in the air. Jinsol tenses and sinks into herself like she's been slapped. Jungeun's never yelled at her before. Never like this. "I WANT MY WIFE TO HELP ME!"

"Jungeun," Jinsol whispers desperately. She *hates* the yelling, she hates the way fear is taking over her, but her plea swiftly cut off.

"I GO SHOPPING, ALONE. I TAKE CHOERRY TO SCHOOL, ALONE. I FEED CHOERRY, *ALONE*." Jungeun screams at her, pointing a finger at her relentlessly, and Jinsol bites her lip to keep her tears in. "DO YOU THINK I HAVE TIME FOR THIS *BULLSHIT* ? I HAVEN'T SLEPT FOR MORE THAN FOUR HOURS IN SO LONG!"

"I- I didn't know-"

"BECAUSE YOU *NEVER* KNOW." Jungeun's voice ups an octave. "You wouldn't know *anything* if it *hit* you in the face." Jinsol has shrunk at the outburst, but looks up to see that her wife is trembling with anger.

Jungeun quiets, but her shouts still ring in Jinsol's ears. The shorter woman lowers her head for a few moments before looking at Jinsol again, this time, with sad eyes.

"I f-feel," Jungeun starts, and turns her face away in an attempt to hide the tears pooling in her eyes, a sight that simply opens a new layer of hurt in Jinsol that she didn't even know existed. "I feel like I just let you walk all over me?" Jungeun questions so weakly, looking away and biting her lip, voice cracking. "Because I do everything. And I always, *always* say yes to you, and," she cries, "I never get anything in return."

Jungeun is covering her sobs with her hand now, and as hot tears roll down Jinsol's face she can't take seeing her in pain anymore. She wants so badly to run over and take her wife into her arms. But she can't. Because it's all her fault.

"I'm... I'm s-so tired," Jungeun chokes out, voiceless, defeated. "Every single day, I'm so, so

tired-” She meets Jinsol’s panicked, teary eyes. “I’m exhausted,” she whispers, then silences to shut her eyes and cry quietly.

Before Jinsol can even take another breath, the sound of the minivan’s car horn rips through the deafening silence. One long honk, followed by several consecutive short ones coming from their impatient daughter waiting in the garage.

And once the quiet returns, Jungeun says the words that break Jinsol’s heart.

“I can’t do this anymore.”

Jinsol feels her entire world stop.

Panic begins to run through every cell in her body, the ambiguity of her wife’s statement shaking her to the core. Suddenly, it’s hard to breathe.

“I have to take Choerry haunted housing,” Jungeun says in a steely tone, tears still flowing freely down her face. “Another thing I have to do alone,” she adds, the bite returning to her voice.

Jungeun turns to grab her coffee container and puts on a pair of sunglasses from her purse.

And before Jinsol can say another word, Jungeun is gone.

Jungeun slides herself into their luxury minivan, her daughter already comfortable in the passenger seat. Choerry looks confusedly at her mother as she presses a button to raise the garage door behind them. “Why are you wearing sunglasses? It’s 8 at night...”

Jungeun cringes at her daughter’s question. She doesn’t really think it’s appropriate to tell her child the truth - that her other mom’s chronic lack of productivity had driven her to a breakdown, and that her sunglasses were hiding her still teary eyes.

“It’s apart of my costume. I’m... a bodyguard,” she clarifies quietly, starting up the car.

“But you’re in sweatpants-”

“I didn’t have time to change my whole outfit Choerry can I please go get your friends already?” Jungeun snaps quickly.

“Okay! Okay! Jeez...” Choerry huffs as she pairs her phone to her car, taking control over the stereo. Jungeun lets her; she definitely needs her daughter’s tunes to stay awake tonight.

Sighing sleepily, Jungeun asks “So who am I getting again? The usual group?”

She sees Choerry shift a bit awkwardly in the corner of her eye. “Um... No actually. I mean, we’re all still friends! This is just... a new group that I’ve been hanging out with,” the eighth grader says, with the hesitation of entering uncharted territory.

Jungeun lifts an eyebrow, but nods acceptingly. “Okay, just put in their addresses.” Choerry nods.

Although Choerry is excited, there are so many things she worries about for the night ahead. The girl has known them all since sixth grade, Hyejoo since birth, and yet it feels like she’s preparing for some kind of debut. She desperately wants to make a good impression, and feels overwhelmingly self-conscious at the thought of not being able to present herself well enough.

But Choerry thinks that, maybe today, she'll just try to relax and be herself.

What has she got to lose?

The brisk fog outside is perfectly eerie for Halloween, while swarms of costumed children and a glistening full moon light up the night.

Jungeun has been driving for about thirty minutes now, and staying awake has been surprisingly easy for her. How could it not be, considering the unexpected entertainment she was being provided with by the children entering her car?

The first two eighth graders, her goddaughter Hyejoo to her pleasant surprise and a cute new girl named Yeri, were picked up normally enough. The two came out of their estates normally, and got into the vehicles without any problems. Well, other than Irene forcing Jungeun to roll down her window as she listed emergency contacts for 10 minutes straight. And Jiwoo slamming her smiling face up against the glass.

Both of the middle schoolers were dressed in costume, just like Jungeun's own daughter.

Yeri had her dark hair up in an extravagantly high ponytail and wore an oversized light pink hoodie to be who she proudly calls "Yeriana Grande." The child's makeup was glamorous, nails done equally as fabulous, and the only reason she wasn't decked out in high heels was because she (in an obviously practiced airy Ariana impression) said she "can't let these ghosts catch me slippin'."

Hyejoo seemed to not be dressed up at all, donning her usual black athleisure attire reminding Jungeun very vividly of Sooyoung in college. However, on top of her head was a green diamond from *The Sims*, hovering above a headband via pipe cleaner.

Once the two girls were seated in the back, Jungeun noticed the change in Choerry's demeanor immediately. The CFO swears she has never seen her daughter so enthusiastically engaged in a conversation with her friends... ever. As the three of them discussed random pop culture events loudly, Jungeun couldn't help but smile herself at every one of Yeri's quick-witted remarks or Hyejoo's sarcastically dry shutdowns.

But it's when Jungeun arrives at the final pick-up house that she realizes these kids are really one of a kind.

At the curb of a neighborhood with beautiful suburban homes, Jungeun watches as young children happily walk beside their car with their parents in tow.

Her mind briefly wanders to the first time her and Jinsol took their daughter trick-or-treating, how her wife had lovingly convinced her to dress up as a queen with her to appease their pleading, princess 5 year-old.

She quickly forces the thought back down when she remembers the events of earlier tonight.

Suddenly, a pocket-sized child in a hot pink wig and equally bright dress catches the mother's eye as she runs full speed through a rose bush pathway of the nearest house. Following behind her is an even *shorter* girl wearing a bald cap, giant sunglasses, a fake goatee, and a baggy untailored suit.

Jungeun isn't sure what the girls are smuggling until eggs begin to splatter all over the bright green lamborghini in the driveway.

“IT’S GO WON MINAJ BITCH!”

Both Choerry and her mother gasp, while Yeri cheers Hyejoo nods approvingly in the back like the car owner surely deserves it.

Relentlessly, the two of them egg the expensive sports car until they’re all out of ammunition. Then, the girls are sprinting to Jungeun’s car like their lives depend on it.

The bewildered CFO isn’t really sure how to react when they enter. It’s not every day she sees a mini Nicki Minaj vandalize someone’s car. Whose car even was that? One of their parents? But at the same time, Jungeun didn’t know the whole story, so who was she to judge? Besides... it wouldn’t be the first time she’d fled from a car vandalization.

She shakes the thought off quickly, delaying the confrontation of her feelings from earlier. Jinsol just can’t seem to leave her mind tonight. (But when has she ever?)

All seriousness aside, it *was* Halloween, and Jungeun thought it was funny.

When the girls reach the car, Jungeun hits a switch to open the doors for them.

“HELLO EVERYONE,” The shorter, bald-capped girl huffs out loudly, and Jungeun marvels at the fact that the child looks no older than 10 but has the speaking voice of a 50 year-old overly-friendly white woman truck driver.

“Hey Yeojin,” Hyejoo greets with an amused smile, and looks behind her for Nicki Minaj who follows to the car close behind.

“HeeeEeeEooOOOwaAH!” Yeri greets, attempting at an Ariana Grande vocal run.

“...Alright...” Yeojin says outside of the car, not yet coming in. “Madam President! What a royal surprise,” she addresses Choerry, who giggles fondly in the front seat.

And Jungeun watches under her sunglasses as Yeojin raises her own shades, the little girl’s pupils dilating and breath hitching in her throat.

“Well hello there...” Yeojin rasps out, suddenly speaking in the most sultry tone an eighth grader can possibly muster. “Mademoiselle...”

Jungeun’s eyes widen in amusement at the middle schooler who is clearly hitting on her. She holds her hand out of the driver’s seat window to shake. “Hi, I’m Mrs. Kim.”

Instead of shaking her hand, Yeojin brings the mother’s hand to her lips for a soft kiss. Choerry puts her head in her hand, extremely embarrassed. “Call me Yeojin...” She says in an attempt at a sexy voice. “You look... how you say... radiant tonight?”

Jungeun snickers, quite entertained by the most bold child she’s ever met in her life. “Very nice to meet you Yeojin.”

“Mrs. Kim... How would you like to be Mrs. Worldwide?”

“YOU’RE BEING WEIRD,” Hyejoo yells from the backseat.

“*SHUT UP!*” Yeojin growls back, then switching back into character as her best attempt at a womanizing billionaire. “Mrs. Kim... I’m afraid there are no more seats in the back... I guess the only option is for me to sit in your lap...”

“This is literally a minivan with three more seats.” Hyejoo speaks again.

Suddenly, the Nicki Minaj is at her partner in crime’s side in the open window. “Hi Mrs. Kim! I’m Chaewon,” and Jungeun’s heart melts at the tiny little voice, starkly juxtaposed with Yeojin who sounds like a seasoned chainsmoker.

“HURRY UP AND GET IN SO WE CAN GO!” Yeri yells, feeling empowered as the diva she is dressed as.

And the two girls get in the Kims’ van, Chaewon taking a middle seat right next to Hyejoo in the back, while Yeojin sits in front of them with Yeri next to the aisle. The children sink into their plush, comfortable seats.

“This is a very nice car Mrs. Kim. You should let me take you for a ride someday,” Yeojin proposes confidently.

“You want to give her a ride in her own car?” Hyejoo chortles.

“Your poor ass...” Chaewon puckers her lips next to her.

“QUIET OLIVIA!” Yeojin yells, adjusting her ridiculous fake goatee.

“You know I’m married right Yeojin?” Jungeun smirks into the rear view mirror, playfully deciding to join in.

“Oh yes...” Yeojin recalls, remembering thick-ass Dr. Kim. She’d almost forgotten about her! *But two is better than one...* she snickers to herself. “You are both incredibly lucky...”

“What are you dressed up as anyway Yeojin?” Choerry asks as Jungeun moves the car forward to drive them to their first house of the night.

“Well I wanted to be something really terrifying,” Yeojin says back in her normal voice, adjusting her bald cap. “So I decided to be the scariest thing to *ever* happen to rap.”

“She’s Pitbull.” Yeri clarifies from behind Jungeun, and the mom can’t help but let out a laugh along with the others in the car.

“I wanted to be 6ix9ine for the rainbow hair but you know, it’s too controversial. Still a little raw there.” Yeojin says with a serious nod.

Jungeun snickers, despite not even knowing who that is. Maybe she could take off her sunglasses earlier than she had thought.

“May I have the aux Princess Bubblegum?” Yeojin asks Choerry from the back, after various more passionate conversations that had Choerry laughing her hardest in years.

Throughout the entire ride so far, Jungeun noticed the girls paused without hesitation to educate Choerry on any unfamiliar topics as to keep her daughter included, which gave her even more reason to like them; she noticed that more often than not, Choerry’s usual circle wouldn’t even stop to do the same.

“We don’t have an aux cord, we use Bluetooth-”

“WOOOOOOOOW WE GOT BILL GATES IN THE HOUSE!” Yeojin exclaims. “Can I use your

phone then?"

Choerry nods with a little yawn at being out later than usual, and tosses the other girl her iPhone. Yeojin lights up the screen, and is greeted by a close-up picture of Chad as her lockscreen. "Eugh..." She scrunches her face in disgust.

As their car zooms through the nearly empty freeway, Yeri leans over the aisle to watch Yeojin look for a starting song.

"It's not what I think it is, is it?" the PTA president's daughter asks knowingly.

"Oh it's absolutely what you think it is," the principal's daughter smiles. "We're about to light this bitch up," she whispers, causing Jungeun much alarm.

"What are you kids-" Jungeun starts when suddenly, a familiar very high-pitched bubblegum pop beat starts over the speakers.

"*AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!*" Chaewon screeches like a wild animal from all the way in the back, scaring the living daylights out of Jungeun. The tiny girl has barely spoken the entire car ride, and now she's basically doing the best she can to stand up while being restricted by her seatbelt.

"YEAAAAH!" Yeri cheers, while Hyejoo has the biggest smile that Jungeun has ever seen on the serious child's face since her birth.

Choerry is very confused, as she begins to recognize the song as the smash hit 'Super Bass' by Nicki Minaj. "What's going o-"

"THIS ONE IS FOR THE BOYS WITH THE BOOMIN' SYSTEM, TOP DOWN AC WITH THE COOLIN' SYSTEM," Chaewon shouts fervidly throughout the car with the flow of someone who has done this innumerable times before.

Jungeun looks up to the tiny child in the mirror, astonished. ***"WHEN HE COME UP IN THE CLUB HE BE BLAZIN' UP, GOT STACKS ON DECK LIKE HE SAVIN' UP!"***

"AND HE ILL, HE REAL, HE MIGHT GOTTA DEAL, HE POP BOTTLES AND HE GOT THE RIGHT KINDA FEEL," Yeojin raps with Chaewon.

"HE COLD, HE DOPE, HE MIGHT SELL COKE, HE ALWAYS IN THE AIR BUT HENEVAFLY COACH, HE A MADA FUCKIN TRIP-TRIP SAILOR OF THE SHIP-SHIP, WHEN HE MAKE IT DRIP-DRIP KISSEM ON THE LIP-LIP," Chaewon spits like she was born to.

The children continue to rap together with the dedication of a Grammy performance in the seats behind them. Jungeun is absolutely enamored with them, looking over to Choerry at her side, whose eyes twinkle with wonder in the faint light.

(The CFO gets the impression that Choerry hasn't been very close to this eccentric band of misfits. But judging from the smile on her face, Jungeun can tell she wants to be.)

"Yes I did, yes I did, somebody please tell him who the eff I is! I am Go Won Minaj, I mack them dudes up, back coupes up, and chuck the deuce up-"

"BOY YOU GOT MY HEARTBEAT RUNNIN' AWAY!" A new voice makes Jungeun's smile even more enormous - it's Yeri, belting out perfectly on pitch!

"BEATIN' LIKE A DRUM AND IT'S COMIN' YOUR WAY!" All the eighth graders in the car

are now singing together at the top of their lungs, even Choerry, looking right at home. ***“CAN’T YOU HEAR THAT BOOM BADOOMBOOM BOOM BADOOMBOOM BASS-”***

“He got that super bass...” Hyejoo supplements monotonously, with a brilliant smile on her face.

“BOOM BADOOMBOOM BOOM BADOOMBOOM BASS-”

“Yeah that’s that super bass.” Hyejoo echoes again, while Chaewon cheers happily next to her and pulls her in for a suffocating hug.

Just when Jungeun thinks she’s seen it all, Yeojin, Yeri, Chaewon, and Hyejoo all begin to perfectly vocalize the intermission together, electrifying the air.

Where these eighth graders learned how to do complex vocal arrangements, Jungeun has absolutely no idea, and they sing the chorus all together again as the car zooms through the freeway.

“Yo... YO- THIS ONE IS FOR THE BOYS IN THE POLOS,” Chaewon tackles the entirety of the second verse alone, rapping the syllables flawlessly. The talent from the back of the car puts everyone in the car on Cloud 9. The vehicle is filled with jubilant laughter and poor attempts at rapping along.

And when Chaewon finishes to breathe, they all unify for the chorus once more. Jungeun can’t help but join in with them to sing, making Yeojin scream in ecstasy.

The futuristic music begins to slow and fade in and out, commencing a build-up.

“THE BRIDGE IS COMING! THE BRIDGE IS COMING!”

“CHOERRY DO IT!”

Choerry’s grin takes up her entire face as she clears her throat.

“See I need you in my life for me to stay! No, no, no, no, no I know you’ll staaAAy!”

“WHAT THE FUCK!” Yeojin screams in shock as Choerry sings perfectly.

“No no no no no don’t go away...”

Since when could Choerry sing this well?!? The girls surreally cheer her on deafeningly, like they’ve all known each other for ages as opposed to be stuck all together tonight by pure chance.

(Jungeun looks over again at the elated smile on her daughter’s face in the golden glow of the highway lights, and she knows she’d call it fate.)

“Boy you got my heartbeat runnin’ away...! Don’t you hear that heartbeat comin’ your way! Oh it be like, boom, badoomboom, boom badoomboom, bass,”

“CAN’T YOU HEAR THAT BOOM BADOOMBOOM BOOM BADOOMBOOM BASS!” The other girls sing/yell.

The five voices all come together again to sing the final chorus, the minivan booming, teeming with joy, and Choerry has never, ever felt a euphoria quite like this in her young life.

The raw emotion simply overwhelms the purple-haired girl, and she welcomes tears of pure

happiness as they begin to pool in her eyes mid-song. Choerry knows that today, in the presence of four classmates she never thought she'd be with, she's finally found what she's been aching, praying, dying to have for years.

Belonging, confidence, happiness -

Harmony.

They belt out the last lyrics to the exuberant song, and scream until the stereo finally grows quiet. All the eighth graders and Mrs. Kim cheer out in glee, and Choerry chuckles over her watering eyes in the dark.

Jungeun laughs happily behind the wheel. She turns to look at her daughter, unsure of the last time she's ever seen her so happy being out with friends.

And Jungeun hopes she never has to see Nayeon and company ever again.

The mother finally pulls the kids into the giant parking lot for Haunted House #1, other teenagers spilling out of their own vehicles ready for cheap thrills on Halloween night.

"I heard this one is really scary..." Chaewon says worriedly, long since reverted back to her tiny speaking voice. The child looks genuinely distressed looking out the window to the ominously decorated circus tent.

Hyejoo notices her uneasiness, of course.

"Hey... you don't need to be scared okay?"

Jungeun hears, and she brings her attention in the mirror to the gay activity in the very back. Yeojin and Yeri raise their eyebrows knowingly at each other.

"I'll, um..." Hyejoo's cheeks go red. "I can... hold your hand if you want? And I can guide you, so you won't even need to open your eyes!"

"I'm scared too!" Choerry chimes with a big smile, just to rub it in.

"Ain't nobody holding your hand!" Yeojin exclaims, making Jungeun crack up.

Chaewon turns away from the window to look at the taller girl next to her with a happy smile. "Thanks Oli," she intertwines their fingers together.

Jungeun smiles at her goddaughter, knowing what's going on here. But she wants to revert attention from them before they get embarrassed. "Okay girls, I assume you don't want me to go inside with you-"

"I would love for you to join us Mrs. Kim." Yeojin says, back in her sultry voice, and she just looks like Megamind with all her hair stuffed under her bald cap.

Jungeun smirks and rolls her eyes. "SO, I'll be waiting in this spot. Choerry text me when you guys are finished okay?"

Choerry nods and is about to exit the car.

"Thank you Mrs. Kim!" The voice belongs to Yeri. The rest of them quickly repeat the same

words, making Jungeun smile.

“Thank you mommy,” her eighth grader says sweetly, giving her a swift kiss on the cheek before climbing out of the car.

The costumed children all vacate the minivan, and Jungeun locks the car and reclines her seat, hoping to get a small nap in before the next stop.

When they’re finally all gathered behind the back of the car, Chaewon gasps. “Holy *shit* Choerry!”

All the girls are now looking at their student body president, mouths hanging open.

“What?” Choerry asks apprehensively, crossing her arms, suddenly very self-conscious of her outfit.

“Your *costume!*” Chaewon’s eyes sparkle at the Captain Marvel suit, and she walks up to the taller girl to touch it. “This is so cool!”

“Wow, this is amazing Choerry!” Yeri says impressed. “I couldn’t really see it from where you were in the car, but damn girl! You must’ve paid a lot for this!”

“Not really,” Choerry laughs humbly, in disbelief that Nayeon created. “I just made it with some supplies I told my mom to get from the store. I think it was like \$20 total.” The purple-haired girl says, poking at her outfit, trying her best to hide the smile growing on her face from the admiration. “Well, I guess \$40 if you count the lights.”

“Lights?” Hyejoo asks, unable to disguise the interest from showing on her face.

“Yeah!” Choerry presses a button on the inside of her left wrist and suddenly, her suit is outlined by neon pink, yellow, and green, just like in the movie.

“Holy shit, how did you do this!” Yeojin questions, the colors reflecting off of her large black sunglasses.

“It’s simple physics really, it wasn’t that hard...” Choerry says honestly and nonchalantly, as if it were every eighth grader’s common knowledge to have the skills of an electrical engineer.

“Oh my God, you’re a nerd.” Yeojin says, a smug look growing on her face as if she just discovered some juicy secret. “You’re a *NERD!*”

“I am not!” Choerry protests, turning off the lights on her suit and clenching her fists.

“Woah there Carol, I didn’t say it was a bad thing.” Yeojin corrects, putting up her hands. “It just means you’re different than what I expected. Literally none of us could’ve made a costume like yours. That’s really fucking cool.”

Choerry relaxes and smiles shyly at the compliment, letting go of any hatred she previously had for it. “You don’t... You don’t think it’s lame?”

“What? Hell no! This is the coolest thing ever!” Chaewon giggles from beside Yeojin.

Hyejoo nods approvingly at her side, their fingers still interlaced. “It’s dope shit, Choerry.”

“Thanks you guys,” Choerry plays with her hair a bit as she beams.

The five eighth grade misfits walk through parking lot, brightly lit in the night, following surrounding crowds of older teens to the circus tent.

At the side of the tent is the entrance to a long but fast-moving line, and a booth for collecting admission cash. The girls pay up, queue themselves in line, and feel chills run down their backs as the lights from the parking lot fade. Blacklights, spiderwebs, and laughing high schoolers now cover every corner.

An actor dressed convincingly as Pennywise the clown lurks through the crowd in an attempt to instill fear, squeezing a loud horn every couple of minutes in someone's ear.

"Isn't that assault?" Hyejoo asks quietly.

"Yeah, where the hell did you take us Yeojin? We're like the tiniest people here," Yeri questions apprehensively.

"We're in Satan's asshole, Yeri," Yeojin answers. "The few, the proud, the marines. That's what the fuck we are."

The clown blasts the horn again, a little too close to the group of girls, and Yeojin screams bloody murder, making the rest of them burst out in laughter.

"Awww, are you scared?" Choerry pokes Yeojin's cheek only to have her hand swatted away.

The much shorter girl puts on her oversized sunglasses. "I fear nothing. Literally nothing on this planet scares me. I could get shot in the face and walk away like nothing happened, completely unscathed."

"That has nothing to do with being afraid..." Hyejoo says, and Yeri, out of Yeojin's view, creeps behind the principal's daughter.

"BOO!" Yeri screams abruptly in Yeojin's ear, making her flail her arms around while she screams and curses her out.

Meanwhile, a middle-aged lady in front of them (who looks like the type to demand speaking to the manager) turns around to scowl at Yeojin causing so much commotion. "Excuse me child, are you ill?"

"Yeah I'm the illest, BITCH," Yeojin sneers while adjusting her fake goatee.

The words scare the woman into turning back around as the other St. Jihyo's girls laugh their hearts out at Yeojin's shamelessness. "I'm so sorry," Choerry whispers to the woman through her giggling fit.

The group is almost at the start of the haunted house, about to be let in when they start to finalize group tactics.

"Okay, so Yeojin is definitely going in the back. You literally cannot survive in the front." Yeri defends. "Olivia should be in the front. She shows little to no emotion and would probably scare the actors more than they scare us."

"Gee, thanks Yeri." Hyejoo huffs, Chaewon rubbing her arm silently to reassure her.

"I WILL BE IN THE FRONT," Yeojin proclaims. "Captain Marvel behind me and in front of Yeriana. Olivia and Nicki will follow."

None of them have any better idea, so they fall into that order just as the worker opens the curtain to let them inside the foggy, sinister circus tent.

Yejin begins to shake like a caffeinated chihuahua, prompting Choerry to do most of the leading as they walk through spine-tingling displays. So far, nothing has jumped out at them.

Every eerie room has circus decor lining the walls. The group makes it past a caged grotesque muscle man and rabid bearded lady easily. (Well, as easily as it could have gone with Yeojin whimpering and gripping onto Choerry's arm for dear life.)

The next room has cage bars for walls, and the kids' hearts beat in their throats as they look out to the long, narrow pathway they must get to the end of. They look to their sides and see nothing but emptiness behind the metal bars of the walls.

Reluctantly, they begin to embark across in the narrow walkway - and then, a million hands are suddenly shooting out all at once, clawing to grab them and bring them to the cage walls. Deafening zombie-like groans fill the air.

"AHHHHHHHHH! FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK!" Yeojin sprints to the end at full speed as she violently drags Choerry behind her, the principal's daughter screaming in fifteen pitches higher than they all thought her voice could even go. *"I CAN'T DIE HERE! MRS. KIIIM!"*

Chaewon screams and Hyejoo pulls the tiny blonde into her warm embrace to run them both to the end safely, looking like Nicki Minaj's bodyguard in her all black attire. The four girls now at the end look to Yeri, who is still in the walkway.

"YERI! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?"

Yeri is spinning her high ponytail around in circles like a crack addict, as hands all reach out to grab her.

They yell at her to hurry up while Choerry nearly dies of laughter at the sight. Finally, Yeri runs to join them, and they all catch their breath at the end as the hands retract into their cages.

When the girls continue their quest through the end of the house, they enter a pitch black room.

"I can't see anything!"

"Neither can Stevie Wonder bitch!" Choerry yells back randomly, and they all start erupting into laughter in the dark.

The fun ends when a blinding spotlight suddenly hits the center of the floor, illuminating a psychotic-looking jester smiles at them all menacingly through his exaggerated clumpy eyelashes.

"Ooooh girl." Chaewon criticizes the ugliness quietly, chuckling to herself.

"Oh my God oh my GOD!" Yeojin yells, hiding herself in Yeri's arm now.

The jester cackles maniacally, then points to a cage where two actors dressed up as bloody lions attack each other in their cages.

"IS THIS PLACE EVEN LEGIT? ARE YOU PEOPLE LICENSED?" Yeojin screams in fear.

"Hyejoo, that looks a bit like our moms." Choerry admits, not even trying to make a joke, just stating a pure fact.

Everyone in the room is silent for what feels like the longest time, even the jester and other actors, until something unexpected happens.

Hyejoo starts cackling so hard that she nearly tumbles over, hitting Choerry on the shoulder. “God they’re literally insane enough to be in here right?” Hyejoo asks through wheezes, making everyone laugh as well.

Suddenly, the jester screams and begins to charge towards them.

“*AHHHH!*” They all scream, darting in different directions. The jester begins to corner Yeojin, while she screeches and tries to fake him out to no avail. “YOU DON’T KNOW WHERE I’M FROM BITCH! THE STREETS OF COMPTON HAVE ME ON THE RUN FROM THE FEDS! YOU FREAK, YOU DON’T KNOW ME!”

“YOU LIVE IN HOLLYWOOD!” Yeri shrieks from the other end of the room.

“THE *SLUMS* OF HOLLYWOOD!” Yeojin shouts back as the jester gets closer and closer to her. The jester begins to cackle again. “PEDOPHILE! PEDOPHILE! RAPE AND FIRE AND ISIS AND PEDOPHILE!” Yeojin yells, stopping the actor in his tracks as she runs to join her friends.

Yeojin grabs the rest of them at once, propelling them all to the exit of the giant room. Suddenly, she hears a large thud on the ground. It’s Yeri, who’s fallen hard on the floor.

“SAVE YOURSEEEEEEEEEELVES!” Yeri yells dramatically.

“GET YOUR ASS UP RIGHT NOW YERIANA, WE GOTTA GO.” Yeojin shrieks, still running until she notices that everyone stopped behind her.

Yeri’s eyes begin to roll back into her head, as suddenly she’s convulsing on the floor more violently than a blender at full speed.

“OH MY GOD! IS SHE HAVING A SEIZURE?!” Choerry yells.

But Yeri’s eyes go back to the girls huddling around her. “I tripped... *INTO A GHOST!*” Yeri says in a poor attempt at a demonic entity.

“What.” Hyejoo says flatly. Chaewon is trying her hardest not to laugh at the clear act.

“WHAT THE FUCKKKKK! SOMEONE DO CPR!” Yeojin screams as she hides behind Choerry.

“How would CPR get a GHOST out of Yeri’s body?” Choerry turns to ask as Yeri starts flopping around on the floor more aggressively.

“OH MY GOD SOMEONE PLEASE MAKE HER STOP.” Yeojin cries, tears beginning to roll down her face in horror.

Hyejoo takes a step forward trying to whisper in Yeri’s ear. “Yeri, maybe stop now because I think she’s crying-”

“*AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH,*” Yeri ignores and screeches, using her demonic voice yet again as she spazzes out mercilessly on the floor.

“IS SHE GOING TO DIE?!” Yeojin is full on sobbing now. “YERI YOU HAVE TO STAY ALIVE. STAY ALIVE FOR OUR LITTLE BOY!” Yeojin screams like a maniac.

Choerry leans over to Hyejoo and Chaewon in confusion. “What... Little boy?”

Go Won Minaj shrugs. "Like I fucking know. I literally don't know what she's saying like 98% of the time."

"I'M SO SORRY YERI. FOR EVERYTHING I'VE EVER DONE TO YOU. DON'T HAUNT ME PLEASE, I'M SO SORRY FOR KILLING YOUR HAMSTER IN THE FOURTH GRADE." Yeojin covers her face in her hands in shame.

"WHAT?" Yeri suddenly stops convulsing and speaks normally, sitting up. "YOU KILLED KESHA?! WHAT THE HELL YEOJIN?"

"I THOUGHT I COULD TRAIN IT TO BE THE NEXT MUHAMMAD ALI," The little girl sobs harder than anyone Choerry has ever seen. "HOW WAS I SUPPOSED TO KNOW IT WOULD FLY OFF THE TREADMILL," she wails, yanking her bald cap down in stress.

Yeri huffs and dusts herself off, standing like nothing happened. "Fuck off dumb hoe! You owe me a new hamster!"

"ANYTHING." Yeojin hugs Yeri in glee seeing that she's been successfully exorcised, and the girls continue to move to the next hallway. Choerry has no idea what she just watched.

At the end of this hallway is a singular man in a ticket booth. He smiles at them sinisterly as they walk down the long hallway to approach him, not blinking once.

"BLINK, BITCH!" Yeojin yells into the glass.

Behind his booth, the hallway splits into two tunnels on either side. Both tunnels are gated off and above them, bright neon signs are displayed.

One reads **CLOWN AROUND** and the other, **ACROBAT MANIA**.

The booth runner slams his hands down on the desk in front of him. "These shows are almost sold out..." He says in a high-pitched voice, his Cheshire Cat smile more horrifying closer to the glass. Chaewon hides herself in Hyejoo's chest. "Looks like you'll have to split up..." he chuckles, before immediately changing his entire demeanor. "YOU TWO IN THE BACK," he growls animalistically at Hyejoo and Chae. "Right this way!" he sing-songs.

The two girls obey, and gulp as the gate to **ACROBAT MANIA** violently swings open.

Chaewon reaches for Hyejoo's hand to intertwine their fingers, and Hyejoo has never been so glad for darkness in her life considering how intensely she's blushing right now. Chaewon turns around fearfully.

"We'll see you at the end!"

"We'll see... NYAHAHAH!" The booth runner cackles and Yeri just scrunches her face in disgust, while Yeojin looks ready to piss her pants. The gate begins to close, and the two girls disappear, swallowed by the darkness. "Off you go!" he sings, as the gate to **CLOWN AROUND** swings open.

Yeojin can't bring herself to move forward.

"Come on Yeojin," Choerry whispers. "Clowning around um... You're great at that!"

"Did you just call me a clown."

“GO!” The booth runner screams at them ruthlessly, and Yeri pushes them forward. The gate closes behind them.

Inside the tunnel, a blinding white strobe light is going off as an evil witch cackle plays from an unseen stereo system. The walls are giving off an illusion of movement, as if the wallpaper is melting away.

Yeojin’s violent shaking is about to cause another earthquake in the state of California, so Choerry hesitantly rubs a hand over her arm. “Hey... My moms always told me that singing helps when you’re scared... Maybe that will help you?”

“Choerry as much as I am a whore for both of your mothers that is the stupidest fucking shit I’ve ever-”

The sound of a clown’s maniacal laugh screams through the overhead speakers suddenly.

“*SHE TAKE MY MONEEEEEY!*” A high-pitched Yeojin suddenly breaks into song.

“*When I’m in neeEEeeEed!*” Yeri finishes with a calm smile, eyes closed as she harmonizes in perfect pitch. She nudges Yeojin and they move forward.

“Yeojin, you sound even better in person than on your mixtape!”

Yeojin stops dead in her tracks. “You... You listened to my mixtape?” she asks Choerry in complete shock.

Choerry nods, having done her research. “Oh yeah! You and Chae’s! To be honest I was a little afraid because it’s like, not my type of music. But I thought it was actually really good! I think *Jesus Christ Ghetto Superstar* is your best song. Followed closely by *Type 2Chainz Diabetes*.”

Yeojin’s heart warms, and she smiles endearingly to herself in the dark.

Once they are finally out of the tunnel, the strobe light subsides, leaving them in a dimly lit room. There are multiple clown figures filling the large room, blocking the way to the exit. Some are mannequins, some are dolls, and some are...

“HAHAHAHAHA!” A real clown jumps out in front of Yeojin.

“*AHHHHHHH!*” Yeojin shrieks, suddenly whipping out a police force taser and electrifying the actor, sending him to the ground as he jerks around from the shock. Choerry and Yeri gasp in horror, and so does every other clown actor in the room, breaking character.

“YOU HAVE A *TASER*?” Yeri shrieks from behind her.

“MY MOM GAVE IT TO ME.” Yeojin says, still holding the industrial grade weapon in her hand, unafraid.

“A *TASER*?!”

“MY MOM INHALES A BUCKET OF CRACK EVERY DAY BEFORE SHE COMES TO WORK!”

“Wait really that’s kinda cool-”

“NO YERI SHE’S A FUCKING LOSER!”

Choerry takes them both by the arms to run them all out of the room before they get into deep trouble. “PLEASE DON’T SUE MY FRIEND! SHE’S JUST STUPID!” She yells behind her, cringing at the poor man collapsed on the floor as the other actors rush to help.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyers. This is actual harassment.” Yeojin says, the words being muffled slightly by Choerry’s warm shoulder.

“Yeojin I think if anyone’s getting charged with harassment, it isn’t him.” Choerry chuckles out. Yeri laughs, and Choerry can hear Yeojin laughing quietly too.

The girls can finally see the end of the house, a sign marked exit hangs over the door, but a man with a juggling multiple functioning chainsaws in front of the door.

“HOW IS THIS A REAL PLACE?!” Yeojin cries. “Okay you know what guys? I’m done being scared. I will break a bottle on this bitch’s head at a moment’s notice. Fact.”

But when she tries to step forward, the man begins to chase her.

And finally, after five to seven minutes straight of Yeojin screaming and running around everywhere except the exit, the girls finally make their way through to the open air.

Right outside the haunted house’s exit, Hyejoo and Chaewon are already waiting for them, the tinier of the two still snug in the other’s chest as they hug to keep warm just like the other high school couples behind them. (Hyejoo’s having a great night; this is definitely one for the books.)

“You won’t believe what we just went through.” Chaewon says, laughing to release some of the stress she was clearly just under.

“Ours wasn’t that sca-.” Yeojin says, but jumps before she can finish her sentence as the chainsaw man pops his head out of the door, revving up a chainsaw. Yeojin starts sprinting away.

“Don’t run! That only makes them-” Choerry starts but before she can get out the final words, the chainsaw man is chasing Yeojin around the parking lot. She’s running like a maniac around cars and screaming so loud you’d think she was actually being split in two.

They may have only just finished the first house, but Choerry already thinks that this is the best Halloween she’s ever had.

“They were literally crawling on the floor, like breaking their legs and shit. It was so scary.”

The group of eighth graders had just finished their third haunted house now. Hours had gone by filled with Yeojin’s terrified screams, Hyejoo and Chaewon looking ever so coupley, Choerry thrilled as ever, and Yeri flinging her ponytail around looking like a helicopter. Yeojin had long since lost her bald cap; she’d thrown the sweaty flap at one of the actors as bait.

In the chilly night air, the girls huddle at a small lounging area where one could buy beverages and other fall-themed snacks.

Chaewon takes a sip of her hot chocolate. “You guys are so lucky you didn’t have to see it.”

“I don’t know, watching Yeojin tase a clown was pretty traumatizing,” Choerry remarks, making the other girls laugh.

“ENOUGH!” Yeojin huffs into her drink, long chocolate colored hair resting messily on her chest.

“Why do you carry a *taser*?! Remind me to never piss you off again,” Hyejoo scoffs.

“I asked for it for five Christmases straight.” Yeojin answers matter-of-factly. “You don’t know the struggle of asking for a taser and then opening up the box to see a fucking \$40 gift certificate to Long John Silvers.”

“Who the fuck asks for a taser for Christmas?” Chaewon teases.

“YOUR MOM ASKS FOR MY TASER FOR CHRISTMAS!” Yeojin retorts. “Oh God not Ms. Wong. Sorry queen.” The principal’s daughter then does the sign of the cross reverently.

Chaewon perks her head up from her laughter. “Hey, should we be out here this long?” She looks up at Choerry. “I don’t want your mom to be waiting so long for us.”

“Umm,” Choerry says, fiddling with her cup and not wanting to cause any trouble for them. “She said it was fine for us to be here? Plus, I think she’s taking a nap in the car anyway.”

“We should get her a snack or something!” Yeri kindly suggests, already taking her wallet out of her oversized sweater’s pocket.

“I have one dollar left, but...” Yeojin pulls it out of her suit pocket. “I would *love* to spend my last dollar on her.”

“Gross.” Hyejoo says, opening up her wallet. “Okay, I have a few dollars left.”

Chaewon takes some leftover cash she was storing in Hyejoo’s pocket, then reaches to collect everyone’s money that they hold out. “Think this will be enough?” Chaewon asks, adding a few more dollars into the mix and handing them to Choerry. “You should probably go, you’d know what she’d like.”

And Choerry needs to take a second to let this sink in.

Her old friends barely cared enough to say thank you to *her* when she did things for them, much less to her mother. She looks up at all of girls who look to her awaingly, refreshed at the fact that she’s with friends who think of someone other than themselves for once.

“Sure,” Choerry smiles brightly, despite the fatigue of being out past midnight. “I’ll be right back!”

When the girls get closer to the minivan with a hot cocoa and bag of fresh pumpkin cookies, Yeojin snatches the snacks into her hands wordlessly and runs up to the window. She taps gently on the glass as to startle the love of her life as little as possible.

Jungeun wakes from her heavy slumber to the noise, and rubs her eyes with the pads of her fingers. Sitting up, she finds Yeojin smiling widely right at her behind the window, and she shifts uncomfortably.

The mom opens her door to the middle schoolers who are all crowded around. “What are you guys doing?” she asks, confused.

“Mrs. Kim, we’d like to thank you for your courageous, valiant efforts in chauffeuring us around tonight.” Yeojin hands her the pumpkin cookies. “You’ve done a splendid job, and we all pitched

in to get you a little gift. Mostly me though.”

Jungeun blinks. “You got me cookies?” She really cannot believe her eyes. Based on the past friends Choerry has had over, she didn’t even think middle schoolers cared about anything other than celebrity gossip and school drama.

“And a hot chocolate too.” Yeri says from the back of the group as Choerry approaches her mom with a white paper cup. “We’ve had so much fun, and you’re really cool Mrs. Kim.”

Jungeun’s heart swells up as she accepts the hot chocolate from her daughter.

“Thank you guys,” Jungeun smiles appreciatively takes a sip from her drink and instantly feels warmer, relieving her from at least a tiny bit of the stress she’s been under all day, hell, all week. “This is very, very sweet.”

“Not as sweet as you, Mrs. Kiiiiim,” Yejin winks and Jungeun rolls her eyes, but she can’t help but chuckle.

“Alright girls, get in the car; we have two more houses to cover still!” Jungeun says with newfound enthusiasm.

The girls cheer and find their seats as Jungeun turns up the stereo, starting up the car to take them to their next destination.

“Chae,” Jungeun hears her goddaughter whisper to the sleepy girl next to her.

The group was finally all screamed out for the night, just departing from their final haunted house and being driven to their respective homes.

“Mm?” Go Won Minaj stirs, and lifts her head up from Hyejoo’s shoulder.

“I got you a souvenir,” the taller girl says.

Jungeun looks to her rear view mirror to see Hyejoo digging for something in her back pocket. Finally, Hyejoo pulls a small pin in plastic wrap out of her pocket and holds it up to Chaewon.

“The ghost pin I wanted!” Chaewon squeals with wide eyes. “Oli, you didn’t have to get this for me... I told you I didn’t have enough...” The tiny blonde looks up at the other girl with soft eyes.

“That’s okay, you really wanted it,” Hyejoo smiles shyly, taking Chae’s hand to place the wrapped pin in her palm.

“She got that MILF money...” Yejin interjects quietly.

“Plus, I still owe you from picture day...” Hyejoo suddenly looks down at her feet.

“Hey...” Chaewon tilts her head so that she’s back in Hyejoo’s eyesight. “I already told you I forgive you.” She rubs Hyejoo’s shoulder reassuringly. “It was an accident Oli, you were just really annoyed-”

“But that doesn’t excuse me snapping at you, Chae,” Hyejoo says quietly. “I should have talked about it with you instead of shouting at you.” She looks up with a gentle, apologetic gaze.

Jungeun’s breath hitches at the younger girl’s words. She has no idea what happened with them on

Picture Day, but all she knows is that it sounds awfully familiar.

Well, shit.

Jungeun can't shake the fact that she left her wife crying at the kitchen counter.

God, she'd said some awful things. She never even planned on yelling at Jinsol the way she did. But she'd just had a terrible day, and wanted to tell her those things for a while anyway.

"But that doesn't excuse me snapping at you."

Guilt begins to set in heavily on Jungeun's shoulders.

Sure, she'd wanted to tell her those things for a while now, but that's what she realizes she should have done. *Told* her, in an adult way, like a real married couple. And instead she just screamed, cried, and accused, disregarding any thoughts Jinsol may have had on the matter.

Her heart begins to sink, like an anchor thrown into the sea.

"Hey married couple in the back seat! Can you stop being so LOUD. Some of us are trying to fall asleep to the art that is 'Drop It Like It's Hot' and I can't HEAR IT with you guys writing love notes to each other in my ear," Yeojin says and sighs dramatically.

She turns back around towards the front, closing her eyes to connect with the music. Hyejoo and Chaewon, clearly embarrassed from the outburst, go quiet - but Jungeun swears she can see them holding hands in the mirror before she brings her eyes back to the road.

After ten to twenty more minutes of driving, the three girls have finally joined a snoring Yeri in slumber. Yeojin is curled up on her side, looking a lot smaller than she already is. Chaewon is perfectly snuggled into Hyejoo's side, as the raven-haired girl rests her head on top of the other.

"Choerry," Jungeun whispers in the dark. "Are you sure they're not dating?"

"*RIGHT?!!*" Choerry shrieks noisily, nearly waking up everyone in the car.

"Shhh!" Jungeun smiles as she reflects on the fun night's events. "So," she says, looking back briefly at her child. "Why have you never hung out with these girls before? Or brought them over to the house?"

In her peripheral, she can see Choerry nervously playing with her hands. "I... I don't know. They've never talked to me before. And I've never really talked to them before."

"But?" Jungeun prods quietly, raising her eyebrows.

"But... I don't know. We got put into a group at the aquarium and just kind of... kept talking." Choerry tries to keep her cool, but her eyes are beaming as she looks out onto the road. "Even though Mom was trying *way* too hard on that field trip..." Her eighth grader deadpans. "I probably wouldn't have hung out with them as much if she was being normal."

Jungeun is once again reminded of Jinsol. Of course her wife could be... unusual when it came to her limitless passion for science, *especially* at her aquarium. But her heart was always in the right place.

The CFO's guilt from earlier only increases, and she knows now for sure that this is something she must fix.

But she just nods at her daughter's words. "Well, I like these girls. A lot."

Choerry looks back at all her... friends (?) sleeping in the back, and smiles at them with a full heart. "I do too."

It's 3 AM when Jungeun and Choerry finally arrive at their own home. After parking the minivan, Jungeun turns around from the driver's seat, and sees her daughter fast asleep.

Jungeun gets out of the car to renter the crisp night air, and opens the door next to Choerry. She gently calls her name to wake her up. "We're home," Jungeun says, but Choerry just whines sleepily and curls into herself. "I'm gonna leave you in this car." Jungeun threatens. The eighth grader appears to be completely unbothered by the idea.

Jungeun sighs, unbuckling her daughter's seatbelt, then scoops the sleeping girl into her arms while mumbling something about how spoiled she is. She's already in eighth grade; one of these days Jungeun is seriously going to break her back.

When they enter, the house is virtually pitch black. Jungeun uses only the glowing blue light from the immense fish tank as she carries Choerry up their spiral staircase.

Despite the darkness of the corridor, Jungeun can of course still locate her daughter's bedroom, and walks to the center of the large room to tuck Choerry into bed. Choerry, through her sleepy daze, still thanks her mom sincerely, and they exchange goodnight's and I love you's before Jungeun exits.

As the brunette is coming out though, she hears strange noises at the end of the pitch black corridor.

She pauses and stops breathing to listen in, starting to fear that she's going to be the star of the next haunted house story. It is Halloween night, after all. But the fear quickly dies when she recognizes a familiar voice singing... Miley Cyrus.

Jungeun follows the voice down one hallway to the next.

Suddenly, she notices light coming through the cracks of their guest room's door.

She brings her ear close to the door to hear hushed sniffles and singing along to a song she's heard before playing from the TV.

Jungeun ever so carefully opens the door to see Jinsol in a fetal position on their guest bed in her pajamas, staring at the TV as the credits to Nicholas Sparks' *The Last Song* roll, oblivious to her wife's presence. The blonde cuddles a white pillow tight in her arms, singing, but crying quietly. A tub of chocolate ice cream sits in front of her.

Jungeun's heart is crushed. While she'd been out actually having fun with the kids, Jinsol was crying like this entire time.

Reluctantly, Jungeun clears her throat from the doorway. Jumping from her position, startled and terrified, Jinsol begins to scramble around the bed like someone just poured ice water on her.

After a few awkward moments, Jinsol stands, and looks at Jungeun with visibly puffy eyes from hours of crying.

“Hi,” Jungeun says nervously.

“Umm...” Jinsol starts, voice warped from her stuffy nose. “Hi.”

“Why are you in the guest room?” Jungeun asks, softening.

Her wife looks at her with teary eyes. “I didn’t want to make you more upset.” She croaks out truthfully.

“Jinsol, I-”

“Please just leave me alone.” Jinsol says, and it sounds absolutely empty. She doesn’t actually want Jungeun to go... But she knows she doesn’t deserve it if Jungeun stays.

The CEO moves to turn off the TV without another word. Jungeun steps closer. “Jinsol, it’s okay,” she comforts impulsively.

“It’s not okay,” Jinsol responds coldly and suddenly, voice breaking. “I know you’re only saying that because you’re seeing me like this. It’s not okay. It hasn’t been okay for a long time. I know that now. So please, please don’t pity me.” her wife says, full of guilt. “Just get some rest now, Jungeun. Don’t worry about me.”

Jinsol puts aside the ice cream tub on the circular bedside table, and pulls open the thick white duvet to climb into bed. In her peripheral, she sees Jungeun walk back to the door, and is grateful that the CFO is finally going to get some sleep.

But Jinsol’s brows crinkle in confusion at the sight of Jungeun merely turning off the light and coming back, proceeding to take off her coat and strip other articles of clothing in the darkness.

“What are you doing?” Jinsol asks, half-covered by the blankets as Jungeun walks to the bed’s opposite side. “Why aren’t you sleeping in our bed?”

“Jinsol, we both know we won’t be able to sleep in a half-empty bed.”

“...*Fine.*” Jinsol says, turning over and facing the other direction while her wife gets comfortable, and Jungeun can’t help but think she just sounds like a little baby.

There is no light in the room except the moon’s, faintly streaming in from above the sea through the guest room’s glass walls. As they lay in bed so far apart, the silence is deafening.

Jungeun looks over to see Jinsol’s back, and she’s curled into herself, facing away. Judging by her breathing, Jinsol seems to be too stiff to possibly relax into sleep anytime soon.

Even though Jungeun is practically running on empty, she knows she won’t be able to rest either until this conflict is resolved.

Jungeun scoots closer to her wife, and puts a hesitant hand on her arm. “Sol...” Jinsol remains tense. So Jungeun comes closer until there’s no distance between them, spooning the taller woman, snaking an arm around her midsection. “...I’m sorry,” she whispers, cuddling the warm body of her other half.

“...It’s my fault.” Jinsol says quietly. “You shouldn’t be apologizing at all.”

Jungeun nuzzles into her, and inhales her ever-present scent of fresh linens and happy memories, soothing her in a way only her wife could. “I don’t care if it’s your fault. I should’ve talked to you

about this instead of yelling at you.” Jungeun admits softly.

Jinsol is still quiet. Jungeun carefully moves her blonde hair away with one hand, and plants comforting kisses at the nape of her neck. But under her touch, she feels that Jinsol is still, for the most part, tense.

“Jinsol...” She lifts herself a little with the arm not around her wife. “Look at me, please...” Jungeun begs.

And Jungeun notices Jinsol’s shoulders start to shake.

“I t-thought-” Jinsol is crying quietly, and can barely get the words out. “I t-thought you were g-going to leave me,” she says, voice breaking.

“What?” Jungeun says, hovering over Jinsol, taken aback.

“You were so mad at me... and... you said,” Jinsol’s adjusted to look up at her now through blurry, tear-filled vision, and is fighting gasps. “You said you couldn’t do this anymore,” Jinsol says, shaking her head through tears.

Jungeun’s heart shatters at the realization.

“Oh my God,” Jungeun says, suddenly overcome with guilt. “I didn’t mean it like that - Oh Jinsol...” As she leans on one arm, she brings her other hand to Jinsol’s wet cheek. She brushes away some stray strands of blonde hair that are sticking to it with the utmost care. “Baby, look at me.”

Jinsol keeps shaking her head with shut eyes, but Jungeun is patient, stroking a thumb gently over her wet cheek and asking her again. She finally opens them.

“I *am* mad at you,” Jungeun says honestly. “But I would never, *ever* leave you Jinsol,” she says, every word filled to the brim with emotion because of how imperative it is that Jinsol knows her truth. “You are the love of my life,” Jungeun says with conviction. “Never in a million years would I walk away from you.”

Jinsol just cries harder, and Jungeun pulls her into her arms to hold her as tight as she possibly can. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Jinsol repeats, as the sadness in each time brings tears to Jungeun’s eyes. “I keep making everything worse,” she cries, thinking of Choerry, Jungeun, everything these past few months. “I didn’t- I swear I don’t mean to be so clueless and inconsiderate and... I’m so, *so* sorry I’ve been hurting you Jungeun,” Jinsol sobs uncontrollably in her wife’s arms, panicked, and clings onto the light of her life like she’s about to disappear.

“Shhh, baby,” Jungeun whispers to calm her love down, running her fingers through Jinsol’s blonde hair, burying her head in the crook of Jinsol’s neck. “I’m here, I’m not going anywhere okay?” she reassures with all the love in the world. “I’m right here...” she soothes.

They stay connected in the dark for a while, Jungeun holding Jinsol together as she falls apart in her arms. Jungeun murmurs words of love into her ear, keeping her steady, and feels tears streaming down her own cheeks as well from hearing Jinsol’s panicked sobs.

(They’ve both always been the biggest softies.)

Ever so carefully, Jungeun reclines back onto the pillows of the guest bed, still holding her wife, who has settled down into just quiet sniffles and gasps.

Jinsol raises her head to look into her eyes as they both rest on the bed. “Jungeun,” she says, even more congested than before. “I’ll-”

“No,” Jungeun stops her mid-sentence. “Let’s talk tomorrow okay? Please just sleep baby,”

“*You sleep!*” Jinsol practically shrieks, and starts sobbing all over again.

Lord, Jungeun muses, and she can’t help but giggle just a bit.

“Stop laughing at me!” Jinsol cries like a baby, and Jungeun just cups her face and leans in to press a sweet kiss to her cheek. “You haven’t even - Oh God, it’s 3AM and you haven’t even been sleeping,” Jinsol sobs.

Jungeun sighs. She has a point, and all the fatigue is starting to catch up to her again. “Okay, okay, I’ll sleep. But only if you sleep too, alright?” Jungeun compromises, gingerly tucking some blonde hair behind Jinsol’s ear.

“Okay,” Jinsol says in a tiny voice, and clears her throat as if to regain composure. “In a bit.”

The CEO takes a few more deep breaths, then peels herself out of Jungeun’s arms to lay next to her. Jinsol looks to the ceiling in the darkness. Eventually, she’s able to take deep, self-calming breaths with closed eyes.

Then, she turns to see Jungeun already looking at her in the moonlight. And in her loving gaze lies uncertainty, yet budding hope.

Jungeun herself knows only time will tell if her wife changes. But there’s something in the way Jinsol is looking at her, the new understanding in her eyes, that makes her think that maybe things *have* finally turned around, for the better.

“...Can I hold you now?” Jinsol asks sweetly.

Jungeun blushes and turns away on her side, and Jinsol snuggles up to her back with an arm around her.

“*The Last Song?* Really?” Jungeun giggles.

“You know I don’t like scary movies,” Jinsol says in a small voice. Jinsol didn’t think it would be the best idea to watch a scary movie home alone. At the devil’s hour. On Halloween night.

“Because you’re a big baby,” Jungeun hums.

“*Go to sleep!*” Jinsol whines, with the authority of a three-year old. She pulls her smirking wife even closer to her chest.

And after the longest day imaginable, Jungeun finally begins to relax in the arms of her favorite person.

But before she lets herself fall asleep, Jungeun searches for Jinsol’s hand in the darkness. Once she finds it, she raises it to her lips. “I’m so sorry I yelled at you,” she says, drowsy but sincere.

“I needed to know,” Jinsol whispers. She hates the fact that the whirlwind of her career had made her so aloof, so completely indifferent with those she loves the most yet again. Putting herself in Jungeun’s shoes, she knows she’s probably deserved it. “I’m sorry for everything, sweetheart.”

Jungeun murmurs something laced with sleep that Jinsol can’t quite make out. “Hmm?”

“Take out... the fucking trash...” Jungeun mumbles, half-awake. “And I want... my creamer.”

“Of course my love.” Jinsol kisses the top of her head from behind. “Anything you need,” she smiles, and makes a mental note to do it first thing in the morning... along with a few other things.

And finally, in Jinsol’s safe embrace, Jungeun falls asleep.

She wakes to her 6AM alarm.

Opening her eyes just a crack to the dark room, Jungeun is thrown for a loop when she realizes she is hearing the familiar gentle flow of the waterfall pool connected to the master bedroom.

She peels away the comforter to see that she is indeed no longer in the guest room, and instead in her and Jinsol’s main bedroom.

Did she... carry me? It wouldn’t be the first time Jinsol carried her; despite her lithe build, she was much stronger than she appeared. But regardless of how many times it’s happened before, the thought still makes Jungeun blush. And unless the entirety of last night was some fever dream, that seems to be the only explanation.

Jungeun feels weak from only three hours of sleep, but, like always, she does her best to push fatigue down as she starts to sit up. She shivers at the morning cold. It’s taken years of self-discipline to not allow herself five more minutes.

Before she pushes the covers aside though, she hears the door between their walk-in closet and bedroom open. Jinsol pads through quietly, freshly showered and dressed ready for a casual outing. She doesn’t seem to notice Jungeun is awake.

“Hi,” Jungeun whispers sleepily as the light streams in from the open door.

Jinsol looks to her wife, and walks over with an apologetic expression. “Oh no... Did I wake you up?”

“What...” Jungeun asks, realizing how odd this situation is; Jinsol is always fast asleep at this hour. “What is going on?”

“I’m taking her to school,” Jinsol whispers, sitting on Jungeun’s edge of the bed.

“*What?*”

“I’m taking her to school,” Jinsol repeats calmly, and cups her sleepy wife’s cheek. “Get some rest baby,” she smiles at Jungeun, who just looks back at her, nothing short of stunned.

“I also made us all breakfast,” Jinsol continues. “It’s downstairs in the microwave. I know you don’t like crumbs in the bed, otherwise I would have brought it to you.”

Jungeun can feel her heart absolutely glowing in her chest at the acts of service from her wife. When was the last time she got to sleep in on a weekday? She can’t even remember. Without having to take Choerry to school, she won’t have to be ready for work for another few hours!

“Go back to sleep sweetheart,” Jinsol says, taking some of the duvet and covering her beloved up with it again. “I’m gonna run some errands after, okay? I’ll see you when you get home.” She can’t stop the smile spreading across her face at the sight of Jungeun happily snuggling back into their

sheets.

But before Jinsol stands, Jungeun reaches out from under the blankets to take her wife's hand in hers. "Thank you..." she says, so very gratefully.

Jinsol leans down to give Jungeun a warm kiss on her forehead. "I'll see you later, my sleeping beauty," and Jungeun giggles at her corniness. "Rest up. I love you so much."

"I love you too," Jungeun says, opening her eyes to look at her wife appreciatively as she says it. "Be safe," she says through a yawn, and curls back into the blankets, soothed by the warmth and the ambient noise from their waterfall.

"I will," she hears Jinsol say, and with that, Jungeun is out like a light once again.

"Um, why are you down here?"

Jinsol looks up from her phone to see her daughter coming down the staircase with her pink Kanken, energetic and ready to go despite only having four hours of sleep.

"Where's mom." The eighth grader asks flatly, unamused with the surprise in front of her.

"I'm taking you today." Jinsol says, spinning her car keys in her hand. "I made you pancakes," she gestures to the dining room table. Sure enough, there's a pretty plate made for Choerry of pancakes, eggs, sliced strawberries, and bacon next to a full glass of orange juice.

"I don't like pancakes anymore." Choerry says defiantly.

Jinsol leans back on the kitchen island, staring at her child with raised eyebrows. "Well, what do you like now?"

"Mom takes me to Starbucks."

Jeez, Jinsol thinks to herself, *Jungeun needs that much coffee?* "You prefer Starbucks every morning over your favorite food in the world?"

"Things change," Choerry snaps back coolly. She doesn't look Jinsol in the eye.

But she sets her bag down and looks up through her eyelashes to just see Jinsol just smiling softly at her. "I'll wait in the car." Jinsol takes her purse and walks out of their spacious common area. "Take your time," she tells her, before exiting the house.

Choerry enters their dining room and turns on a few more hanging lights to illuminate the room. The sky is still dark outside, and she stretches and looks at the appetizing plate in front of her as she takes a seat. She reluctantly pours some of the syrup sitting next to her, and slices a bite.

As much as she wished with every fiber of her being that they didn't... As Yeojin would say, the pancakes absolutely slap. And so does everything else on the plate.

Choerry vows to never admit it out loud, but she is loving this a lot more than a Starbucks blueberry muffin.

Jinsol wakes from her power nap to Choerry opening the backseat door of the Tesla. The chilly

morning air gusts into the vehicle, and Jinsol fiddles with the display panel to crank the heater. They buckle their seatbelts.

“Ready?” the CEO asks, turning around to her daughter, but catches Choerry looking around the sleek, futuristic car in amazement.

It hits Jinsol then, just how rarely Choerry is ever in her car.

“Yeah,” Choerry nods with a toothless smile.

“Do you want to play your music?”

Choerry widens her eyes. She knows her mom is just kissing up, but still. “*Really?*” she asks in pleasant surprise.

“Yeah, why not?” Jinsol looks at her in the rear-view mirror.

The eighth grader smiles a bit nervously. “Um... Mom doesn’t let me play my music in the morning.”

Jinsol chuckle from the front, putting on her favorite Prada shades. “And why is that?”

“She says,” Choerry does a deep voice, “*I need my peace and quiet.*”

They both giggle together at the impression of Jungeun, and Jinsol’s heart blooms as Choerry’s smile shines bright on her face.

“Of course you can play your music.” The mother taps through the panel to pair Choerry’s phone to the stereo, and turns the volume up a little.

“Thanks mom.”

Mom.

With a smile, Jinsol drives them out of the house, as the morning sun begins to rise on the ocean beside them.

When Choerry looks out into the bustling cafeteria for the first time since she’s felt her entire world change, she can’t help the automatic first steps she takes to her usual table by the largest window.

Nayeon sits with a blank expression, indifferent as she paints her nails. Chad is attempting to eat five pizza slices at once. Jeongyeon, in front of him, chants “CHOKES, CHOKES, CHOKES.” Dahyun is, well...

“Whaddup Dahyunators! Welcome to my vlog!”

...being Dahyun.

But before she’s even a quarter of the way there -

“UNIQUE FROM *THE BACKYARDIGANS!* IS THAT YOU!”

Choerry turns to the far end of the cafetorium to see Yeojin calling out to her, Chaewon, Hyejoo,

and Yeri waiting right beside her.

The building is noisy, the intensifying simultaneous conversations of all topics and frequencies clouding Choerry's senses, but looking over at the group she'd adventured with, she's able to make out the mouthing of three words as Yeojin yells out across the room.

Sit with us.

Choerry stops to stare in shock for a little bit, for what feels like the millionth time at the group who will never stop surprising her.

And then, she smiles.

Hyejoo yells at her to hurry up. The student body president is finally bounding across the room, away from the largest window. Away from where she belongs, but knows so deeply in her heart that she does not.

While Choerry quickly paces to join them, Yeojin turns at the sight of her mother and Ms. Wong walking her way, engrossed in some humorous conversation, their own lunches in hand as they simply pass through the cafetorium to get to some destination elsewhere on campus.

Yeojin stares at her mother, eyebrows raised and a smug smile on her face.

Principal Haseul laughs hard at something Ms. Wong says, then catches a glimpse of Yeojin, who then proceeds to flick her tongue around obscenely.

The principal turns beet red with wide eyes. She just raises her hand to the side of her face as a barrier to block eye contact between her and her daughter, while Yeojin chuckles discreetly at their little secret.

Then, Choerry is in front of them, and they're walking to the patio with their lunches all together once again.

"Welcome to our tax bracket," Yeojin greets with a proud smile, and they all walk to the cafeteria's exit together.

Meanwhile, Jeongyeon looks over Chad's head at the sight of bright purple hair in her peripheral, walking with a new group of girls out the door.

"Nayeon," she calls quietly, still looking at them. "...I think we're being replaced."

But when Jeongyeon looks to her for a response, she sees Nayeon glaring at them, furious eyes already trained on their backs as they walk away.

Twenty minutes into a lunch full of hard laughs, bad staff impressions, and tomfoolery, Choerry eats comfortably and happily from the seat she's spent weeks staring at from the inside.

"Hey, Choerry," Yeojin starts, clearing her throat after a particularly long laughing fit to speak seriously. "I can take down the video, if you want."

Choerry furrows her brows, tilting her head. "What video?"

"You know. Milf Smackdown. Hyejoo says it's fine. But if you want, I can delete it." Yeojin offers considerably.

The purple-haired eighth grader blinks for a few seconds. Having the video taken down would be less embarrassing for her. Then again... It's definitely more embarrassing for their mothers. And they *definitely* deserve that.

"Nah," she smiles. "And take away your internet fame? I'll pass."

Yeojin gives her a crooked smile, and nods endearingly.

Chaewon giggles and raises a clenched fist. "Long live Lil Peni\$!"

Many hours later, Jungeun comes home.

She opens their front door to find her wife sitting snug on their couch watching another documentary on marine life on the living room TV. On the coffee table in front of her are Thai take-out containers that Jungeun recognizes with a smile to be from her beloved favorite place.

Jinsol turns to meet Jungeun's eyes, and says "Hi" with such a cute grin it makes Jungeun blush when she returns the greeting.

The CFO herself is definitely in a happier, more energetic mood than usual. (Jinsol notices this, and she watches the skip in Jungeun's step with endless love.)

As Jungeun takes off her black blazer and sets it on one of their loveseats, she notices that all the containers of food are untouched. "Are you... waiting for me?" Jungeun asks, melting.

"Yeah," she answers from the living room with a smile. "I was going to cook dinner, but Choerry called me a fire hazard after my third try at chicken parmesan. But I promise to learn! So I got you Thai, your favorite."

Even though Jungeun nearly popped a vein to get this kind of treatment, her wife's thoughtful gestures still fill her heart to the brim. There's nothing like your favorite food with your wife after a busy day. "Thank you honey," she says appreciatively.

Jungeun opens their fridge for a drink to find it bountifully stocked with new groceries. But her eyes immediately go to the shelf she uses the most, which has now been cleared out to make room for ten new bottles of coffee creamer.

Jungeun is smiling so hard that a happy cheer involuntarily escapes her throat.

Jinsol, still watching the fish swim the ocean blue, smiles knowingly.

Making her way back to the living room with some water, Jungeun takes a seat next to her favorite person on the couch and snuggles up to her, resting her head on Jinsol's shoulder.

"How was your daaay," Jinsol sings as she kisses the top of her wife's head.

"It was so great. I got to sleep in... I had the best breakfast I've had in so long, I get my favorite food for dinner..." Jungeun leans in closer to Jinsol's lips for a kiss, closing her eyes. "And the best part is... I get to come home to-"

"Me," Jinsol blurts out involuntarily, closing her eyes for a kiss.

"Ten coffee creamers!" Jungeun can't even bring herself to kiss Jinsol because of her happy giggling. "Why would you get so many?"

“I don’t know how fast you go through them!” Jinsol laughs. “And I didn’t wanna keep forgetting to get you new ones. I just know that you finish them fast.” Jinsol leans in to kiss her forehead. “Hopefully not so much anymore,” she adds. “Can I show you something I made today?”

Jungeun nods at her side, and Jinsol mutes the documentary and reaches over to a small side table to retrieve her MacBook. Opening the laptop, she enlarges a calendar. The CFO looks to her wife, who looks a bit nervous to show her this for some reason.

“Why are all these days blue?” Jungeun observes. “They’re blue for...” she taps the touchpad a little. “...Over two months?”

“So... I made us a family calendar.” Jinsol says, looking at her wife, who sits pleasantly shocked.

“I’m blue, you’re red,” Jinsol continues. “They’re all blue because... I’m going to be taking Choerry to school and picking her up every day for the rest of my time off.”

Jungeun’s blinks hard. She turns to look at Jinsol in shock.

Jinsol still clicks away. “So this way, I’ll get to spend a lot more time with her. She kind of tried to ignore me in the car this morning, but we she told me a bit about her day on the way home, so I think we’re getting somewhere!” She chuckles. “Also, these little blue dots here are our grocery trips. I’ve got all of those covered too, all the way until I go back to work.”

Jinsol looks to her wife, who is now staring at the computer with wide eyes. She’s speechless.

Jungeun doesn’t say a word as she clicks through the calendar on Jinsol’s lap. The CEO isn’t sure whether or not that’s a good thing. But she stays quiet too, letting Jungeun review at her own pace.

“What are those?” Jungeun finally inquires. She points to all Friday nights, which all have the emojis of a blue heart and a red heart next to each other.

“Movie nights! Every Friday. We’ll rent something and stay in, just like we used to, remember?” Jinsol says, referring to a tradition from long long ago when she wasn’t yet Jinsol Kim, CEO, but just Jinsol Jung, dating a very pretty girl.

“Or we can go out. Just the two of us,” Jinsol supplements. “Whatever you want,” she says with a smile.

Jungeun is still quiet, and it makes Jinsol nervous. Little does she know Jungeun is just trying to make sure that this isn’t a dream.

“I want to spend time with our daughter,” Jinsol continues, “But time for us is also important,” and Jungeun really, really hopes Jinsol can’t see her tearing up. For the past years, they were lucky to have a single meaningful, longer conversation during most weeks, as work always gave them conflicting schedules and all-too frequent nights where they’d come home to the other already asleep. “So... movie nights are also on the calendar. You have time to talk to me, and I have time to listen.”

Jinsol looks to her wife, who has teary eyes and opens her mouth to something. “I’m not done,” Jinsol says with a soft smile.

The CEO taps the touchpad to take them further in time to the later months of the new year, unexplored by Jungeun. The weekdays are now half blue and half red, alternating in pattern each day like dominoes. “This is when I go back to work again,” Jinsol points to a day that kicks off the alternation. “When I go back, we’ll switch with mornings and afternoons. And I made a little

program here,” Jinsol gestures to the side, “That connects the family calendar to our work calendars. So, if something for work from either of us might interfere, it can automatically switch the car trips around in a more convenient way. But we’ll still have about an equal amount between the two of us at the end of each month. It’s like this for the rest of the school year.”

And just like that, Jungeun feels the weight of 10,000 bricks lifted off her shoulders. But instead of thanking Jinsol, she sits in utter disbelief - she had gotten so used to the crushing weight that she had forgotten how it felt to be free of it.

Jinsol sets the laptop on the coffee table, and just when Jungeun thinks she’s done, Jinsol takes both of her best friend’s hands into her own. “Jungeun...” The raw emotion in Jinsol’s eyes makes Jungeun’s breath hitch. “I know I haven’t been the best mom... Or the best wife either.” She says, apologetically.

“It shouldn’t have had to get as bad as it did for me to realize that. You should never, ever have to be doing everything. I’m sorry I wasn’t paying enough attention to your needs to wake up sooner.

“I know I have to make some big changes,” the blonde continues. “But I’m willing to make all of them, if it means you get the rest you deserve.” Jinsol rubs her thumbs over the backs of Jungeun’s palms, making Jungeun’s heart flutter. “And I know no amount of words or temporary fixes could make my mistakes up to you... So... I hope you like my plan.”

Jungeun stops, just to take it all in.

She’s overwhelmed with all of her wife’s thoughtfulness, as Jinsol looks to her for some type of response.

No more creamerless coffee. No more sleep deprivation for over two months. And no more doing everything alone.

Jungeun nearly makes Jinsol fall off the couch when she pounces on her for the biggest, tightest hug on Earth. The wave of happiness is the biggest one she’s felt in so long, and she squeezes Jinsol so giddily with all its force to the point where Jinsol is choking out that she can’t breathe.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” Jungeun’s heart sings, with joyous teary eyes as she holds Jinsol tight. “I love you,” she repeats, muffled in her wife’s sweater. “Thank you so much baby, I-thank you for all of it, I love you *so* much Jinsol-”

“You like it?” Jinsol chokes out from Jungeun’s powerful hug.

“I love it,” Jungeun can only breathe out with eyes full of wonder and appreciation. “I love it, I love you,” Just thinking of all of the help she’s going to get, the *sleep* she’ll get gives Jungeun the biggest rush; there’s nothing on her mind besides pure happiness. “Thank you,” Jungeun whispers blissfully, taking Jinsol’s face in her hands, and leans in to kiss her with all that she has.

Even after the millions of kisses they’ve already shared, Jungeun and Jinsol still make moments that belong in a highlight reel. This is one of them.

Jinsol is laughing into their kiss, they both are, and Jungeun peppers countless happy little kisses all over Jinsol’s face. “You deserve it Jungeun,” Jinsol whispers, bringing their foreheads together.

Jinsol pulls her wife in for another tight hug, Jungeun exhaling years worth of relief into her hair.

“I’m sorry it took me so long sweetie,” the scientist says sheepishly. And Jungeun just pulls away, holding Jinsol’s face in her hands with a soft, forgiving smile.

Their lips meet again, and their excitement calms into slow, loving kisses that deepen as they lose themselves in each other.

Jungeun breaks away to push a giddy Jinsol backward onto the couch, Jinsol's hands rubbing at her wife's back to pull her impossibly closer. They're kissing passionately, Jungeun on top of Jinsol when-

"EW!" Choerry squeals unexpectedly from the top of the spiral staircase, grossed out at the sight of her parents going at it on the couch.

But despite that, she can't help the big smile that spreads across her scrunched up face - her moms taught her what love is, and it's been a while since she's seen her favorite couple so lovey dovey.

Jungeun pulls away immediately, extremely flustered, and they both catch their breath as Choerry comes down the stairs giggling and covering the side of her face with a hand. "You guys are *so* gross!"

"We're gonna chase you." Jinsol says abruptly, propping herself up on her elbows.

"Chase me?" Choerry looks at her, raising her eyebrows with a disbelieving smile. "I'm literally thirteen."

Jinsol takes the love of her life's hand and stands up, and they both start to take slow steps towards their daughter. "And then we're gonna tickle you."

"Stop." Choerry says. But they only creep closer to her. "Stop it," Choerry says, much more fearfully, her voice rising in pitch as her eyes begin to widen in fear.

Jinsol lunges to grab her, and Choerry screams in excited fear. She sprinting down a hall, laughing her heart out as both of her moms run to chase her down.

The Thai food on the coffee table has long since gone cold. But that doesn't matter to Jungeun and Jinsol - Choerry will always be their little girl.

Chapter End Notes

Therapy: expensive

Writing Domestic!Lipsoul, Married!Lipsoul, Family!OEC: free

Orbits want soft and happy Lipsoul and we are here to PROVIDE!

As you can see, this chapter was our longest yet! So much thought and prep was put into this one. So for this one especially, TeLL uS aLL yOuR fAvOrItE PaRtS, your favorite scene(s), and all the emotions you experienced because they keep us writing... And don't forget to appreciate a sleepy girl in your life <3 - Cat

p.s. hope you enjoyed the soundtrack! :)))) and next up is the mother/daughter tag team Trivia Night competition <3

THIS!! chapter was so fun to write i hope you all liked it uwuwuwuwu. guys loonacon is so soon like next week everyone scream...<3 bye -daniela

- curiouscat.me/catmsdqna (Cat)

Trivia Night

Chapter Notes

Guys honestly reading all of the loving comments, tweets, memes, private messages, EVERYTHING never fails to put a smile on my face. We even got drawings. DRAWINGS!!!! Omg. Can't even express how much I appreciate all of you. All your kind words are our fuel to continue! Thank you <3

- Cat

p.s. also don't ask why the kids call her principal haseul. they just do.

hi everyone!!! thank u so much for the responses on the last chapter!! this update is really important to me lowkey because as a writer i obviously use a lot of my own experiences to make my work but for this chapter i went really into it so i hope you guys like it uwu. school is starting soon which means we might be slower than usual with updating but bear with us and continue to enjoy our story :) - daniela

TW: Bullying

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Choerry wakes on the cold November morning, her first move, like any other American teen, is to check her phone.

She rolls over under her thick, purple comforter with little crescent moons, past her plentiful favorite plushies to her bedside table.

And when Choerry opens the chat window between her and her boyfriend, her face falls a bit when she's presented with only a new read receipt on the numerous good morning and goodnight texts she's sent over the past few days.

Nevertheless, she opts to send another.

Choerry: good morning baby! <3 <3 <3 just wanted to ummm say good morning! :D i know you have that english test today and i hope you ACE it! i love you so so so so much, have a great day my sunshine <3

Despite the energy in her text though, Choerry can't help but stare at her previous good mornings that have accumulated before today, and fights tears that start to prickle at her eyes at the lack of reciprocation.

Hours later that Monday, the blazing Southern California sun shines high over St. Jihyo's Presidential Academy - and Ms. Wong is interrupted from her grading by the mischievous cackling at the desk in front of her.

While her seat partner Yeri watercolors silently with her airpods in, Yeojin is practically dying of laughter in front of her phone. The shortest girl in the class is louder than every other conversation in the room combined. When she catches her breath for a moment, she realizes her art teacher staring straight at her, bewildered.

“Did you finish your assignment?” Vivi asks, trying to hide the amused smirk on her own face from her favorite student.

“Oh yeah, here you go!” Yeojin carefully rips the watercolor paper from her sketchbook at the serrated edge, and hands her masterpiece to her teacher.

Vivi scans the colored paper with narrowed eyes. “This is a woman’s butt.”

“That is a *peach* Ms. Wong. Getting a little raunchy with your thoughts over there.”

The art teacher shuts her eyes in unexpected embarrassment and starts to shake her head. “You better not be looking at anything *raunchy* on your phone over there, or I’ll confiscate it,” she says with raised eyebrows. (She allows phones, as long as the student is finished.)

Yejin snickers at her teacher, then lowers her voice for secrecy. “You wanna see something goofy as hell?”

The little eighth grader doesn’t wait for an answer. She stands and leans forward, extending her arm to Vivi’s face to show the phone screen.

Vivi’s eyes widen when she recognizes the app’s interface as Tinder. She also recognizes the woman on the screen after a few seconds.

It’s Haseul.

Ms. Wong gasps hard, while Yeojin nods slowly in amusement. The art teacher simply cannot believe her eyes - she is face to face with her boss’s (and friend’s) dating profile.

The cover card of Haseul’s profile is a selfie in a collarbone-exposing marigold top, in which she pokes her cheek with an adorable little smile. The image makes Vivi’s heart melt into a puddle of endearment, and her mouth falling open a little as she beams.

“This is... actually-”

“Oh my God Ms. Wong. You *need* to see the other pictures.” The eighth grader swipes the adorable cover photo away to reveal a very interesting photo series.

Vivi can’t really explain it, but it’s one of the best things she’s ever seen.

The first is a very close-up photo of Haseul smiling in her shades, her index finger and thumb pinched together to look like she’s pinching the sun. But she’s horribly off, clearly the result of the photographer’s (Yejin’s) intentional misguidance.

The second is her and Dr. Phil during a book signing held at a Verizon Wireless. (Haseul was the only one camped out at 5am that day.)

The third a screenshot of one of Haseul’s Facebook posts that reads “HELP... Does Fitbit run on wifi or Bluetooth? I don’t want any wifi running through my body.”

Vivi can’t help it anymore, her laughter is so loud the students are starting to wonder what is going on. Doesn’t help that the song linked to Haseul’s profile in the ‘My Anthem’ section is the wildly erotic Ludacris song “What’s Your Fantasy”.

“I s- I shouldn’t be looking at this,” she barely chokes out. But she swipes again, and the next photo is Haseul posing next to a large possum with thumbs up. “Aww, is this your... p... possum?”

Vivi asks stifling even more laughter.

“GAHAHA- Swipe again,” Yeojin commands, and Vivi does. The next photo is the exact same possum baring sharp teeth and chasing a terrified Haseul down the street. “She just picked that shit up off the ground!” Yeojin wheezes, while Vivi rests her chin in her hand, eyes screwed shut in disbelief. “We don’t have a fucking possum!”

“Language,” Vivi says, failing to be authoritative as she curls her fingers to cover her smile.

“SORRY- We don’t have a fucking rodent!” Yeojin exclaims.

“But the first photo was so cute!”

“Yeah,” Yeojin huffs. “Tinder moves your best picture to the front. I don’t know how to turn that off. So all these women keep messaging my mom and... It’s kind of respectable actually.”

Yeojin looks up through her eyelashes to study Ms. Wong’s reaction - and boy, does she get one.

“What?” Vivi questions with a tone that Yeojin thinks is...

Dare she say... the tiniest, teensiest, weensiest bit...

Threatened.

“She has a lot of messages?”

Her favorite teacher is skilled with covering up her emotions from years of practice, Yeojin can tell. But the principal’s daughter still catches on, and grins internally. *I knew it.*

“Yeah... Like *thousands*,” Yeojin exaggerates, just to watch the smallest flame flicker in Vivi’s eyes. She shouldn’t be playing with fire, shouldn’t be meddling in affairs like this, but who is she kidding? It would take a whole lot of money and rap promo for her to do what she’s supposed to do for once. “Thousands of these women just be messaging my mom like ‘You’re a catch’ or whatever...”

“Oh...” Vivi sits in her seat, staring at the screen, staring at the 99+ notifications button gleaming. “That’s great for her,” and Vivi knows that for the life of her she should just stop talking, knows she should just drop it with her student *who is the daughter of her boss* - but she can’t stop the question from leaving her mouth. “Does she ever message any of them back?” she prods curiously, feigning innocence.

Yeojin knows she’s really gotten the reaction she wanted.

“I mean,” she guffaws. “I don’t know... But I mean, one of these days someone is definitely gonna lock her down...” She says casually, successfully executing this situation that she’s masterminded to expedite romantic action between the two.

When Vivi doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, Yeojin feels thrill coursing through each and every one of her veins.

And then, the teacher says a very weak “Good for her!” with a sweet smile, but joyless eyes.

The eighth grader cannot *believe* how smart she is, and the crumbs of the teacher’s passive aggression are music to her ears. Ms. Wong... is *jealous*?

“Read the bio I gave her,” Yeojin commands to ease her favorite teacher, stifling a cackle with her

hand.

And at the bottom of the screen - **“The only difference between me and a mosquito is that I don’t stop sucking when it bleeds!”**

Vivi is now losing her mind laughing, her head thrown back with a hand covering her mouth to quiet herself, while Yeojin begins to wheeze so hard she crumples onto the classroom floor shaking.

“*Yeojin-*” The art teacher struggles to breathe as she laughs into her hand with eyes screwed shut. “That is *extremely* inappropriate-”

“Wazzup playas!”

Principal Haseul and her big dorky smile are now at the threshold of Ms. Wong’s classroom. Her heart is filled to the brim at the sight of her two favorite people having so much fun together at the front desk.

Ms. Wong clears her throat to collect herself out of formality in front of her superior, but Yeojin doesn’t even try as she continues wheezing on the floor and holds on to the side of Vivi’s desk for dear life.

Haseul blinks. “What are we laughing at?”

“Someone showed me your dating profile,” Vivi whispers to her friend with an amused smile, out of earshot from the rest of her students when Haseul walks close enough.

“My what?” The short-haired short woman says, bewildered. “I don’t have a... what profile?”

Vivi’s eyes widen in realization and she turns towards Yeojin, who is convulsing with laughter at the side of her desk. “She doesn’t even know?!”

Haseul snatches the phone from her daughter’s hands in panic and swipes through the *highly* embarrassing portfolio of profile photos. “Ohmygod,” she breathes lowly, her ears red with complete embarrassment. And *Vivi* was looking at it?!?! “Oh my *God*.”

In the middle of class while the other students continue talking, oblivious, Haseul is turning red as a tomato. “I don’t even know what to say to you,” she says flustered and overwhelmed with her daughter, the most embarrassed she’s been in months. “*Delete it! Delete it right now-*” she hisses.

“Why? Do you see all these women who want you?!” Yeojin hisses.

Then, Haseul falters. “...What women?”

Yeojin snatches the phone back, and presents the Matches section to Haseul’s eyes. “You look good for a hag, apparently!”

Haseul’s eyes widen at the countless, *never-ending* list of women who have initiated a conversation with her online profile. “Oh wow...” She can’t believe her eyes, ego inflating a bit. “That’s... That’s a lot of messages...”

“Look at this one, she’s literally a model.” Yeojin points to a gorgeous dark-skinned woman.

“Oh wow, she’s so pre-”

“OKAY CLASS-” The mother and daughter are whipped out of their conversation to see Vivi suddenly jolting up from her seat, addressing the class almost aggressively.

Haseul is frozen in shock at the sudden outburst... while Yeojin looks at her with wide eyes.

You’re welcome, Yeojin mouths knowingly to her mother with a mischievous smile, as Vivi continues addressing to the class about their next project. The eighth grader scampers back into her seat out of respect.

Haseul stands in shock while Vivi talks to her class. Then, when she finishes, the class resumes their work and casual chatter.

Vivi returns to her seat elegantly, then turns to meet Haseul’s involuntarily widened eyes.

The teacher suddenly rests her hand on top of Haseul’s on her desk, and begins using her fingers to trace over her smooth skin with a feather-light touch. White heat flares through every inch of Haseul’s insides at the caressing going on, and the shorter woman stares dumbfounded with flushed cheeks.

“See you at lunch,” the art teacher smiles innocently.

Then, Vivi gets up again after sitting down for a grand total of 10 seconds to walk away to the back of the room, subtly flipping her perfectly straight dark orange hair behind her. Haseul is left utterly entranced with her heart beating in her throat, the blissfully intoxicating scent of her co worker's passion fruit shampoo and expensive perfume lighting up her senses.

And as Vivi walks to the back of the room, she takes a shaky breath, not even knowing herself where any of that came from.

What the hell am I doing?

“I think if McDonald’s were a person, I’d eat their ass.”

“You mean Ronald McDonald?” Chaewon asks, shouting a bit over the sound of moving traffic.

“You think I want to eat clown ass?” Yeojin gags.

“Yeah, it would taste pretty *FUNNY!*” Chaewon grins smugly while delivering her punchline.

Everyone groans dramatically.

“That sucked.” Hyejoo says at her side, which makes Chaewon actually look a bit hurt. The dark-haired girl hits her arm gently. “I’m just kidding.” Immediately, Chaewon is smiling again.

Yeojin, Chaewon, Hyejoo, Yeri, and Choerry walk under a cloudy November sky towards the new McDonald’s that was just built at the foot of the St. Jihyo’s hill. School had just ended, and the five girls have been easily entertaining each other on the sidewalk, making the ten minute walk fly by.

“If McDonald’s were a person, they would smell like *ass.*” Yeri counters. “I just know those employees don’t take showers and neither do most of the people that go in there,” she says with a serious expression.

“On the contrary... I believe McDonald’s is a sanctuary for the covert communist bourgeoisie,” Chaewon supplements, blowing a giant pink bubble of gum.

“No, no, you’re getting this all wrong,” Yeojin huffs. “This is strictly on the basis of cuisine. McDonald’s’ shit isn’t gourmet but they got you craving it every time. It’s called *longevity*. That’s what you call marriage,” she defends while Hyejoo visibly rolls her eyes from behind her and Choerry giggles.

The student body president had now completely dyed her luscious long hair a soft pink, removing all traces of purple and any remnants of the same look from the school year’s start. Choerry walks in the middle of their pack as they move as a unit away from the street and into the bustling McDonald’s parking lot.

“Oli, it’s windy, I’m cold,” Chaewon suddenly says as an excuse to wrap her arms around the taller girl’s arm.

“Are you fucking serious Chaewon? The wind current is about as strong as a baby’s breath.” Yeojin deadpans, making the girl scowl and blush. “Anyways. McDonald’s would be a thiqq queen with two Q’s. I am *not* open to constructive criticism.” Suddenly, Yeojin stops in her tracks and squints at the drive thru, where a homeless man walks away from the line of cars and is munching on a Quarter Pounder.

“EDUARDO?!” The eighth grader yells out. Yeojin begins waving aggressively at the man. He gives a big smile with missing teeth, waves, and proceeds to walk away towards the depths of Los Angeles.

“Who the fuck was that?” Hyejoo asks with an incredulous expression, speaking for everyone except Yeri, who for some reason seems to understand whatever just happened.

“That’s Eduardo. He’s the homeless guy that sells my mixtapes on the bus for me,” Yeojin clarifies as they approach the golden arcs of the fast food building. “He gets to keep the money and I get the promo.” Without any further explanation, the tiny child opens the front door and walks inside with Yeri, the rest of the girls following behind, confused as ever.

The atmosphere of the eatery is suffocatingly thick, filled with the aromas of deep fryers and the pandemonium of rowdy students. Although only a newly opened branch, the building is extremely lively with nearly all its tables occupied.

As the principal’s daughter looks around, she observes the multiple ordering lines - short in height as they consist of primarily rowdy St. Jihyo’s middle schoolers. And then, there’s one slightly taller, slender woman with a bob standing in the very back of the middle line that looks extremely like-

“Mom?!” Yeojin shrieks in horror, and the woman turns toward the group of her students with a giant dorky smile, waving gently. Her eyes widen when she sees the familiar pink-haired girl accompanying her daughter.

“CHOERRY?” Principal Haseul nearly yells, pointing at the eighth grader.

“Hi Principal Haseul!” Choerry exclaims enthusiastically, happy to see her and also pointing back.

“My favorite student and co-worker hellooo!” The principal begins jabbing her arms while pointing, and Choerry naturally does the same, making the two look like the meme of Spiderman pointing at his doppelganger, distracting everyone nearby in the middle of a McDonald’s.

“What is happening.” Yeojin deadpans. “Mom... What are you doing here,” she whispers, slightly frustrated. “I told you I’d be here today and you can’t be in the same establishment as me when

you don't drive me, it's in the contract," Yeojin says lowly with grit teeth, referring to the printed and framed contract they have where her mother doesn't go where she goes unless it's school, home, or the car.

Haseul snaps out of her pointing match with Choerry to face her child. "I know! I know, but I was craving the fries really bad so I sprinted over here the second the bell rang so I could beat you."

Yeojin runs a hand over her face.

"Unfortunately I'm a little slower than I anticipated. That's the tea!" Haseul laughs awkwardly at her own joke. "At least I didn't get hit by cars on the way over. Well, at least, not two." she says gravely.

Yeojin looks at her with a slightly disgusted face, then shrugs. "Okay understandable. Just please don't eat here. But don't get hit on your way back."

"Will do, kiddo," Haseul winks and salutes. "Good to see you girls! And Choerry!" She points at Choerry once more, and Choerry plays along until Haseul turns to order at the counter to order quickly.

"I fucking love her," Chaewon whispers at Hyejoo's side.

"Yeah, you can have her." Yeojin says, massaging her temples. "Why the fuck was my mother doing that to you," she looks to Choerry.

"We're best friends!" the student body president smiles big. "Ever since we started doing morning announcements together," she says, as though there's absolutely nothing abnormal about being besties with the principal.

Once Haseul finishes up and leaves, Yeri approaches the register to order first.

"Hi, can I get a McFlurry?"

"Aren't you gonna get food?" Yeojin whispers right behind her, a bit concerned.

"Oh shit you right. Can I also get two apple pies?" The little black-haired girl requests, then pays for her nutritious meal. (Irene would throw a scolding fit if she were present, but Seulgi would gladly let her daughter have it.)

Yeojin approaches the register next. "Big Mac" is all she says with reverent nods.

Behind her, Chaewon's attention is caught by the sign hanging off the register. "Look Yeojin, they're hiring," the blonde begins to chortle in her tiny voice. "Take a look, grab an app..."

The smaller girl turns around and points at the worker taking her order. "Chae this is you when you turn 40. You have no life, no family, no land and you just went through a ruthless divorce in which you lost custody of your three children and your dog and now you need to buy the cheapest fish in PetsMart and work at a McDonald's." Yeojin says. Then, she turns back to the offended, glaring cashier like nothing happened. "And a large sweet tea please."

Hyejoo and Chaewon follow after; the taller of the two taking the lead to order. "Two cheeseburger meal with large fries please," the raven-haired eighth grader says, ordering for the both of them. "And one large Sprite."

And behind them, Choerry stares at all the choices on the menu... lost.

Although breakfast for her until recently had been consistently Starbucks, dinner was always an entirely different story. Most of the time, whenever Choerry would ask to eat out, she was met with a very irate *“THERE’S FOOD IN THE HOUSE.”* from none other than Jungeun Kim.

Choerry has no idea what the logic is in her shorter mother’s mind. The eighth grader is well aware that her family is well-off enough to eat McDonald’s every meal, every day, for the rest of their lives and not make a dent in the fortune they’ve accumulated already. But regardless, Jungeun seldom relents to her daughter’s requests and protests - no matter how much the child would beg and plead.

So Choerry doesn’t know what to order, really, because the last time she’s been to a McDonald’s was when her other mother would regularly treat her to Happy Meals. After long, laborious days of first grade, Jinsol and Choerry would fool around with apple slices side-by-side in the booth.

That was nearly 8 years ago.

She doesn’t really suppose a Happy Meal applies anymore.

“Choerry,” Hyejoo calls her, snapping her out of her bittersweet nostalgia. The raven-haired girl is carrying a tray of her and Chaewon’s food, as the latter goes to find a table with the others. “It’s your turn.” The cashier looks to her expectantly.

“Oh- Sorry...” But Choerry is still at a loss for an order. “I haven’t been here in a really long time,” she says to Hyejoo quickly.

“What did you get last time?”

“The four piece McNugget Happy Meal.” Choerry says with crinkled eyebrows.

“She’ll have the ten piece chicken nuggets,” Hyejoo saves, telling the cashier who taps at the screen graciously.

Choerry thanks her friend with another apology and adds of a pink lemonade. “Do your moms take you to McDonald’s?” she asks Hyejoo. She knows the two have... similar backgrounds, per sé.

“Fuck no.” Hyejoo answers. She only knows what a McChicken is because of her friends. And when she was craving one when they weren’t around, she remembers the one day she asked her mothers if they could stop by.

“Umm... Sweetie let’s get something better! Like Five Guys or In N’ Out.” Jiwoo rejects politely from the front of the Mercedes.

“Why would you want McDonald’s?” Her other mother breaks her silence in the driver’s seat, crinkling her nose in disgust at the cheap food. “You want a burger? I’ll have the chefs from Lendroit le Plus Prétentieux come over to the house and make one.”

“No, it’s fine I-”

“TOO LATE. I’M ON THE PHONE WITH- Hi Valentin, it’s Sooyoung,” she greets in a lovely, pleasant tone. Hyejoo sighs in defeat.

The gloomy eighth grader huffs into her gray hoodie at the memory. Yeah, she never tried that again.

Hyejoo waits for Choerry to receive her food, and they both make their way to the table where

Yejin had to scare away several hungry crackheads by wriggling her arms back and forth and screaming that she is a giant mutant cockroach.

“And on the roof? Oprah Winfrey. Holding twelve chinchillas, on *God* I could feel Jesus’s presence,” Yeojin says, in the middle of a story while the remaining girls take their seats. Their student body president erupts into a giggling fit along with the others.

“Guys, did you know Choerry listened to our mixtapes?” Yeojin tells the group, reminiscing on what she was told in the haunted house, peeling away the yellow paper wrap of her hamburger.

“Whaaat?”

“I don’t know how you can listen to that shit,” Yeri says sassily, mixing her McFlurry. “When they both refuse to give me a feature.”

“Who’s the better rapper.” Chaewon asks Choerry, slamming her tiny hands on the table, and it’s more of a rhetorical threat than a question warranting free will. “Me or Yeojin.”

Choerry laughs nervously at the little girl’s piercing eyes. “Umm-”

“It’s obviously me. It’s okay, you don’t have to say it. It goes without saying. Like every group has to have an It Girl, and that’s me,” the normally sweet, quiet girl asserts in a high-pitched confident voice.

“PLEASE. It’s literally me.” Yeojin pokes in Choerry’s direction with a fry. “Chae’s tracks are microwaved six times. She douses that shit in effects. *And* she is fucking incoherent. I don’t speak GoWonese.”

Chaewon looks like she is about to splash her friend in the face with her giant cup of Sprite.

“Not me though... That was raw 100% all-natural talent freestyle,” Yeojin speaks slowly and proudly through passionate nods, moving her hands carefully like she’s doing imaginary pottery.

“You mumble over a garage band beat.” Chaewon retorts.

“Your shit is pure noise! At least you can *understand* me while I shed light on the world’s injustices.”

“What are you? The fucking UN? My shit is *so* fucking top tier. My beats psychotic. Hypnotic. Have bitches addicted like a fuckin’ narcotic. *WAAAAHHHHH!*” She screams suddenly and flails her arms in the air at the rhyme she just created on the spot, banging her hands on the table through a newfound adrenaline rush. Everyone in the McDonald’s is now looking at their table. Hyejoo smiles and nods at her side.

Choerry chuckles and sips at her drink. “I like you both equally!”

“That’s what the mom said in *Sophie’s Choice*, Choerry, when she had to choose whether or not to chokeslam her daughter or son.”

“I don’t think that’s how the movie goes-”

“Eventually Sophie had to make a choice,” Yeojin pressures.

Choerry doesn’t choose. In actuality, she just thinks both discographies are so weird she doesn’t even know where to begin comparing them side-by-side. “You’re both talented,” she giggles as she

dunks a chicken nugget in barbeque sauce. “You two should collab!”

Yejin and Chaewon both make loud, dramatic disapproving noises at the same time.

“NO MAN.” Yeojin insists.

“No way. Not again. I refuse.” Chaewon throws her hands up like a spoiled princess (or, just a diva, which Choerry is now amusedly realizing is what the typically mild-mannered tiny girl turns into when it comes to her music).

“*Not* after last time.”

“What?” Choerry questions. “What happened?”

“There were just differences in creative vision...” Chaewon says airily with closed eyes and her nose in the air.

“She’s fucking crazy.” Yeojin says seriously.

“You know sometimes, you just can’t work with people...” Chaewon is now filing her nails nonsensically with her straw.

“Shut the hell up I made your career.”

“Literally what is happening right now.” Choerry says.

“I’m gonna go get a sundae,” Yeri blurts randomly.

“Girl you just had a McFlurry and two apple pies bitch!” Chaewon responds in disbelief.

“Yeah and now I want dessert?!” Yeri leaves to the cash register without another word.

“Okay fine, let’s get another third party to decide,” Chaewon takes a loud sip of her Sprite. “Oli,” she says to the quiet taller middle schooler at her side, tone suddenly turning soft. “Who’s the better rapper?”

“You.”

“And that’s that on that!” The tiny blonde smiles, peeling off the lid of her Sprite. She begins to shake the cup violently against her face to eat the ice.

“Rigged,” The other rapper rasps out.

“You can’t ask Olivia that’s not fair! She’s your girlfriend!” Choerry chirps, feigning obliviousness with a sweet, seemingly clueless smile. (She knows they’re not together; she just likes stirring the pot.)

Hyejoo suddenly flushes beet red, like Choerry flipped a tangible switch. Chaewon is still downing ice, but Choerry can see her ears redden through her wavy sunflower blonde hair. Yeojin holds her breath in anticipation for a response from one of them on the touchy subject.

Chaewon finally pulls the cup away from her face. “Olivia’s not my girlfriend,” she says nonchalantly.

“Y- yeah,” Hyejoo almost stutters out.

That's okay, Choerry thinks. *It's only a matter of time anyway!* She smiles and dunks another nugget.

"Anyway Choerry, you should listen to my new song. I relistened to it and I'm gonna be honest with you, there were tears. Like, tears. AND! You'll never guess- there were tears."

"What is that shit called again?" Yeojin asks, as Yeri returns to their table with her new sundae.

"Live Birth," Chaewon clarifies. Choerry snorts.

"You guys should come with me to the Trivia Night at Chaeyoung's moms' pizza place tomorrow," Yeri says, settling back into her seat. "Her moms are advertising it through PTA, and my mom told me to invite you guys," she rests her cheek on her palm while spooning herself a mouthful of melting vanilla ice cream. "Plus, Chaeyoung's cool and first prize is free pizza for LIFE."

All the other girls "OoooO" at the very appetizing incentive.

"I'm down. I'm a fucking GOD at trivia, could outsmart all of you lames," Yeojin sneers. "And if Stephen Hawking were alive I'd be his fucking pupil right now."

"It's a parent child tag team thing," Yeri adds. "So you do it with your mom!"

"Nevermind," Yeojin sighs. "There go all my chances at winning," Yeojin deadpans while everyone laughs. "But I'm still down. Support the fam."

"I'm down," Chaewon says as well. Yeojin pumps her arm with a "Yesss! Ms. Wong!"

"Me too," Hyejoo says expectedly.

"Me too," Choerry adds. The stricter of her two mothers will probably be busy, but Jinsol should be free considering that she's still taking time off. "Wait..." Choerry looks to Hyejoo apprehensively.

"Don't worry," Hyejoo says, reading her mind about Sooyoung and the trouble that could be brewing if she were in Jinsol's vicinity. "I'll tell her, but she would never show up. I'll just ask my other mom or my babysitter or something."

The rest of the girls nod and they all continue eating their food, laughing and talking without a single care in the world.

Some hours later when the sunset sky is beginning to dim, Sooyoung Ha saunters across the cobblestones outside her mansion. The lengthy stony pathway gradually slopes downward, as it curves around a shady bend toward their front gate where the CEO checks the mail.

With Jiwoo being an internationally known celebrity and Sooyoung being (technically one too after her YouTube debut) one of the most successful businesswomen in history, the self-made billionaires of course pay to have their mail meticulously filtered for them, only allowing close contacts access to their home.

The statuesque woman stands behind the safety of their estate's closed metal gate, between two marble statues of ferocious lions that are frozen in roar. The terrifying degree of detail almost serves as another element of their security.

She opens her mailbox and collects the items inside.

Sooyoung is greeted with a utility bill or two, some invitations to galas and business get togethers, miscellaneous magazines that Jiwoo is subscribed to, and two parcels.

As the birds chirp in the trees above her, Sooyoung sets the mail at her feet and picks up the first parcel to rip open in her hands.

Inside the first package is a magazine in shrink wrap that the CEO turns over with a slight gasp. It's an issue of Forbes.

Her and Jiwoo don the front cover.

MEET THE RICHEST COUPLE IN THE WORLD, it reads front and center, while Sooyoung is photographed in a plush chair with Jiwoo standing behind her, the former lifting her fingers by her ear for her wife to lightly interlace with her own.

And damn, do they look *fabulous*.

Sooyoung reads the attached note to herself, a thank you from the magazine's headquarters and a courtesy gift of the issue two months in advance.

She takes another long, hard look at the cover, and attempts to soak it all in.

Richest couple in the entire *world*.

It feels so utterly abstract. For a billionaire herself, the thought of outranking seven billion others in wealth ironically seems unquantifiable. Oh, how long it's taken to get here!

Sooyoung wasn't surprised when she was first informed that her and Jiwoo were now the richest couple in the world; it *was*, after all, only a matter of time after Sooyoung herself single handedly orchestrated the fall of the Bezos.

The CEO knows she'll never get tired of staring at this beautiful cover. She makes a mental note to have it enlarged and framed.

Carefully, she slides the shrink-wrapped issue back into its parcel and sets it down. Sooyoung retrieves the remaining package to open.

But her heart stops in horror when she slowly recognizes the handwriting on the cover.

FOR HYEJOO, it reads.

The script is her father's.

And for the first time in a long time, all the breath is stolen from her lungs.

How did they get her home address? How did this even get through to their house?!

"SHIT!" she screams vehemently, scaring away all the chirping birds as she violently throws the package to the ground.

"I-I'm sorry Ms. Ha, they said they were family and I-"

“You are to never, *ever* let those people contact us, do you understand me?”

“*I am so sorry ma’am, I will let the staff know-*”

“I don’t care what *anyone* says they are. If you get anything from these people you are to send it back. *Immediately.*”

“*Yes m-*”

“And if I receive one *single* package more from them inside of my family’s home, I will personally see to it that you are never able to financially support yours again. Do we understand each other?”

“*Y-Yes ma’am.*”

“FIFTEEN, CHOERRY! *FIFTEEN* watermelons all stuck inside the plane engine and my mom insisted that I get off the wing instead of saving my people.”

The next day, Choerry is walking through the busy, baby blue halls of St. Jihyo’s and listening to another one of Yeojin’s elaborate stories. The pair are walking back to their lockers together after third period.

Was Yeojin in the middle of her story? Or was that the end? Choerry could not tell you how they’d even arrived at this point in the narrative. But at least the smaller girl was enjoying herself as she told it, and her fervid energy was gleefully infectious.

“HAHAHAHA!”

Choerry and Yeojin both look ahead in the bustling hall to see the origin of the loud, obnoxious laughter.

There Nayeon stands, her head thrown back in laughter assumingly at something one of the basketball boys in front of her had said. Chad stands among them, trying to be subtle about picking his nose.

“LAUGH LOUDER! I DIDN’T HEAR YOU THE FIRST TIME!” Yeojin shouts to the group, which causes them to snap their heads up to look at her. Choerry tenses and hugs her books closer to her chest, immediately uneasy at the sudden confrontation.

“AND BE CAREFUL CHAD, YOU’RE GOING TO PICK OUT YOUR LAST BRAIN CELL IF YOU KEEP UP THE DIGGING!” Yeojin continues from her place down the hallway.

The principal’s daughter’s last comment elicits laughter from every other student who stands around them.

“HEY!” Chad shouts defensively from his position, sizing up Yeojin and completely ignoring his girlfriend next to her. “AT LEAST I’M NOT FUCKING *ADOPTED!*”

“OH SHUT UP!” Yeojin yells back, completely unbothered and not even giving her surrounding classmates a chance to go *OOOH!* “I WAS CHOSEN. LIKE JESUS.” The tiniest girl in the grade barks from across the hall, making Choerry smile in amazement despite her boyfriend forgetting she exists. “AT LEAST MY MOM *CHOSE* ME! UNLIKE YOUR ACCIDENT ASS.”

The entire hall excluding the group of popular kids erupts into thrilled screams and Yeojin smirks,

exalted and triumphant.

Choerry looks up and makes eye contact with Nayeon, who raises an eyebrow at her, sending the student council president's eyes to the ground.

Yeojin ignores them though, and notices her friend's change in demeanor at her side. "Relax," she says. "I was just exaggerating about your boyfriend's brain cells. Maybe. As for your little bitch's crusty ass, I'm not going to rock her shit or anything. She's just been extra obnoxious ever since... You know, you stopped being friends with her."

Choerry looks up to meet the smaller girl's gaze, small worry lines forming across her forehead. "We're still friends, we just hang out less," Choerry asserts, somewhat trying to convince herself, too. She looks over to Nayeon once more, who has continued her chat with the boys, but turns to scowl at Yeojin every once in a while.

"I'm not afraid of her," Yeojin laughs nonchalantly. "But she is truly acting like she's the head bitch in a bad romcom, and it makes me want to curb stomp her directly into the Earth's core."

The worry lines on the president's forehead grow deeper, and she approaches her locker and can't seem to concentrate enough to get the lock's combination right, despite it being the same for months now. Yeojin thinks it's time to change the subject.

"Kidding! I'm kidding. Sort of. Anyway, you're coming to Trivia Night tonight, right? With your mom? Here," Yeojin notices Choerry struggling with the textbooks still piled in her arms and takes them from her to free up her movement.

"Thank you," the pink-haired girl exhales deeply in grateful relief. She rearranges her locker's contents in their designated places, then takes her books back from Yeojin's arms. "And yeah, of course! You ready to get your butt kicked?"

"Yes actually, my mother is not very bright," Yeojin deadpans, and Choerry snickers despite her unwavering massive love for their principal. "But hey, I have to go to class. We're playing recorders in Music today," Yeojin beams and bounces excitedly.

"You like playing the recorder?"

"*Fuck* no! But I do like making Dahyun's ears bleed, and she sits right next to me," Yeojin says, basically jumping for joy. "She says-" Yeojin does an impression reminiscent of Mickey Mouse. "*If you don't stop, I'll sue you!* And that really just gives me a rush you know?"

Choerry smiles at the mockery. "Have fun then," she bids farewell, having enjoyed the company.

Yeojin clicks her tongue through a smile, then turns around to run down the hallway. "HEY DAHYUN!"

The student body president is left giggling to herself as she makes sure she has what she needs. She shuts her locker, only to be sent into cardiac arrest by Nayeon standing right behind the door.

"*OH MyGod*," Choerry gasps, her books dropping to the floor.

"Hey bestie!" Nayeon says with a mischievous smile on her lips. "Aww, did I scare you? Sorry, had to get that in since I didn't see you on Halloween. Or... *any* time after Halloween really," Nayeon boops Choerry on the nose with her finger, but her tone is warning.

"I've been busy..." Choerry trails off, trying her best to ignore the feeling of her stomach twisting

itself into a pretzel.

“Oh I *know!* With your new little friends.” The last words are laced with both disgust and loathing. Nayeon walks closer to Choerry, corning the slightly shorter girl into her own locker. “What about *us* though, Choerry.” Nayeon’s eyes are dark, smile long faded away.

“Um... I miss you too?” Choerry says, back hitting the locker now, as Nayeon is just far enough to make the scene not look like direct bullying but just close enough to make Choerry feel claustrophobically imprisoned.

Nayeon looks at her and is ominously silent for a few beats.

Then, she smiles. “Good.” She tilts her head. “Because I’m gonna offer you one more chance to make it up to me,” the vice president says, backing off slightly. “Come over tonight after school. I’m having a party in my moms’ clubhouse. I’ll *even* let you invite Chad.” The girl reaches over to touch Choerry’s pink hair, and despite the number of times Nayeon’s done this before, the gesture feels entirely alien now. “Because I’m *such* a good friend!” she finishes.

“Now, will you be?” Nayeon says after a long pause, with a tight-lipped, fear-inducing smile.

Choerry crosses her arms to hug her new books, in an effort to dull the furthering sensations of tension causing her to nearly shiver. “I-I actually have plans, with Olivia and them already-”

“*Well fucking ditch them then.*” Nayeon commands.

“O-Okay,” Choerry says, just wanting to get away from the taller girl at this point. “Okay.”

Nayeon flashes her signature toothy grin. “See!” she rests her hand on Choerry’s shoulder, who fights the urge to shudder. “I *knew* you were a good friend!” Nayeon says, backing away to go to her next class.

But before she walks away, she turns around once more to face her classmate.

“You dropped your books.”

With that, Nayeon makes her way back down the hallway and into a classroom, leaving Choerry alone as the bell rings.

Choerry has been staring at her phone placed face down on her desk ever since she got home from school.

After Nayeon threatened her in the hallway, Choerry sat in silence for the entirety of her final class, trying and failing to not let the new, unfamiliar, nervous tint on her worldview affect her. Then and there, she decided to just suck and it and go to Nayeon’s party, just so she would never have to endure the looming feeling of impending doom for any longer.

Unfortunately, that did mean she would have to lie to her new friends. When the bell rang, Choerry made a beeline straight towards her mother’s car. Thankfully, Jinsol continued her streak of letting her play her music via Bluetooth, allowing for the child to let music wash away her worries.

But when she got home and remembered she still needed to make a definite choice, her uneasiness began all over again.

She stares at the phone on her desk for a few minutes longer before finally forcing herself to grab it. Instead of opening a new group thread to let her friends know she wasn't going, she taps on the person that might help her feel better.

Choerry opens up the messages she shares with Chad, still no response from her text this morning. Hopefully now that she was in a predicament, he would respond like the gentlemen Choerry knew (or just really really hoped) him he would be.

Choerry: hey :(i don't feel good and i really need someone to talk to

The girl smiles with joy seeing an immediate "Read" stamp as a typing bubble appears on her screen. She knew Chad would be there for her!

Chad: stop txtng me im at practice ill get in truble

Chad: c u @ nayeons

Choerry's smile fades.

She flips her phone facedown again and puts her head back so it bumps the wall gently.

In all honesty, Choerry would rather curl into a ball and stay home all night rather than have to deal with any of this drama. But she knew that just wasn't something that could be done.

Bzz bzzzz.

Choerry lifts her phone quickly hoping to see a text message from Chad, anticipating an apology for having to cut her off in during her time of need. Instead, she is faced with a new group thread named *TIDDIE JUGGLERS* with four other people.

Yejin: sorry pink doodlebop idk why u weren't in this gc earlier

Yeri: my ad i forgot to add her

Chaewon: hey sista!

Hyejoo: Choerry you're still coming to trivia night right?

Choerry falters from the smile that she didn't even know was growing on her face. This was it, the perfect opportunity to tell them that there had been a change of plans.

And yet, she realized how she had completely forgotten about the entire mess within just four text messages from the group. It was like a lightbulb had finally turned on in her head because she knew then and there that no matter how terrible the day had been, these girls would always help her feel like things weren't as bad as she made them out to be.

Screw Nayeon for trying to make her leave them for some subpar party that she probably wouldn't even enjoy.

Choerry: of course!!! what time are you guys getting there?

Chaewon: gowonators i can't go anymore im sorry :((((being forced to have dinner with potato loaf

Choerry: i love potato bread!

Chaewon: no that's what i call my mom's fuck ass boyfriend

Chaewon: remember the lambo we egged b4 haunted housing

Chaewon: comment f to pay respects

Yejin: F

Yeri:

Hyejoo: f

Choerry: f

Yeri: also choerry let's get there 6:30 to secure a seat. it gets PACKED up in there cuz the readsticks be poppin off

Yejin: can u fucking stop with that

Yeri: with hat?

Yejin: THERE'S NOT EVEN A B IN THAT

Choerry giggles at the fight occurring on her screen as she types out one last message.

Choerry: ok! see you guys there :)

“So I was wearing my tail and my dad was like, ‘Hyunjin take that off right now we are literally at an Olive Garden.’ Like *o-kay* dad, my freedom of expression doesn't stop just because we're at a restaurant.”

Hyejoo takes a long sip of her iced water as Hyunjin passionately goes on about some incident with her father she refers to as an injustice against art. The two were seated at a table at Heart Shakers Pizza Parlor, waiting for Trivia Night to commence.

Usually, the eighth grader would be a little more irritable at the sound of her babysitter's voice, but hey - she'd rather have Hyunjin here than her insane mother or a million people asking her other one for a picture or an autograph every second.

There was the best pizza in town and fun trivia on the way, so if that meant Hyejoo has to put up with her babysitter for a little while longer, so be it. “Damn, that's crazy.” Hyejoo says in the most monotone voice she could muster. “Tell me more.”

Hyunjin continues to speak very animatedly. Hyejoo's attention is stolen by a weird stranger outside the window of the restaurant.

The stranger can't be older than a teenager, and she's wearing a maroon beanie, an extremely baggy white Thrasher shirt, and ripped jeans. As the unidentified Korean skateboarder peers through the window, she stares right at their table like she's just seen a ghost. Hyejoo narrows her eyes at the older girl in return.

“He was dangling by his feet from the ceiling Olivia! And I was like ‘Damn Michael Cera why are you at an Olive Garden?!’”

“Wait, Hyunjin-” Hyejoo interrupts her babysitter. “Do you know that girl?”

Hyunjin turns to look at the girl in the window, whose eyes go wide and she scrambles to poorly hide behind a lightpost.

“Oh Jesus *Christ*.” Hyunjin grumbles, her bright mood abandoning her in the blink of an eye.

The other girl peers from behind the pole to see Hyunjin still looking at her, then rushes to hide again as if her entire body isn’t still visible. Hyunjin stares back with a locked jaw.

After a few more seconds, the girl outside finally gives up and walks inside. She can’t do it without nearing Hyunjin and Hyejoo though, as their table is directly adjacent to the door. Awkwardly, the girl adjusts her beanie and walks up to them, all while Hyunjin is practically scowling at her.

“Hyunjin...” she says, in the deepest voice Hyejoo has ever heard from a teen girl. “Hey... Been a while...” She scratches the back of her neck.

“What are *you* doing here, Heejin,” Hyunjin snaps, leaving Hyejoo to raise her eyebrows in surprise at this new Hyunjin she’s never seen before. (She’s definitely enjoying it!)

“I work here. I’m about to clock in for my shift.” Heejin says, bowing her head a little as if trying to hide from Hyunjin’s gaze.

“Wowwww, a working girl! Ryujin must really love that.” Hyunjin says bitterly, leaving Hyejoo with *so* many questions.

“Hyunjin, I’ve been trying to talk to you but you haven’t answered any of my texts-”

Suddenly, Hyunjin’s phone pings, cutting off Heejin who tries to explain herself.

Sooyoung Ha: I’m in the parking lot. You can leave now if you want.

“YOU KNOW WHAT. I can’t do this right now. My Uber is here,” Hyunjin says abruptly.

“Wh- You drove us here,” Hyejoo says, a smile growing on her face from amusement.

“UBER IS HERE!” Hyunjin repeats, getting up from her table and quickly leaving the restaurant, leaving Heejin and Hyejoo alone at the table.

“Hi, I’d like some breadsticks and an explanation,” Hyejoo snickers, making Heejin turn away from watching Hyunjin walk out the door longingly. “Because that’s the most I’ve liked her ever.”

“I’ll put the breadsticks in when I clock in.” Heejin says, and without another word she leaves, bounding toward the door marked **EMPLOYEES ONLY**.

Hyejoo smiles amusedly to herself until the door opens again and she sees a familiar tall, slender, and professionally-dressed woman clicking her heels as she walks towards her. Hyejoo’s stomach drops.

“Mom? Wh- Why are you here?” Hyejoo says, the joy from her face vanishing immediately.

“What? You told me to be here so here I am.” Sooyoung says in the most blunt voice in existence.

“Yeah but I didn’t think you would-” Before Hyejoo can finish, she’s interrupted by another familiar voice.

“Olivia!”

Sooyoung narrows her eyes. “Who the hell is Olivia?”

Choerry is bursting through the door of the pizza parlor, a bright smile on her face as she waves energetically at Hyejoo. Her expression changes to one of fear though when she sees Sooyoung sitting next to her though.

“Choerry please slow down, I can’t keep up with... *You*.” Jinsol stops in her tracks and looks at Sooyoung like she just strangled an entire litter of puppies.

Sooyoung turns her head, then narrows her eyes and deeply exhales through her flared nostrils. “*Jinsol*.” She says sourly, like it’s the most awful taste in her mouth.

Choerry and Hyejoo look at each other, their facial expressions being that of pure terror. *I didn’t think she’d come*, the dark-haired girl apologetically mouths to Choerry.

“The only person who will dye her hair blonde for two decades straight,” Sooyoung finishes coolly. “That can’t be good for your cells. Aren’t you a biologist?”

“TCH-”

“Okay, mom... Let’s... Go over there and sit down!” A very nervous Choerry grabs Jinsol’s arm to direct her in another direction.

But all the other tables are occupied or reserved; they have no choice but to sit with Sooyoung and Hyejoo. *Of course*.

Reluctantly, Choerry takes a seat in front of Sooyoung. “Hi Auntie Sooyoung! It’s nice to see you!” she greets, dragging down Jinsol who looks ready to pounce.

“Um. Hello, Choerry.” Sooyoung replies awkwardly, removing her dagger-like stare from Jinsol for two seconds.

“Hi Aunt-” Hyejoo starts, but quickly rethinks her words as Sooyoung aggressively turns to her with her elbows slamming onto the table.

“Uhhhhhhhhh Dr. Kim.” Hyejoo finishes, cringing at her sudden change of wording.

“Hi goddaughter.” Jinsol says sweetly, a warm smile spreading across her face.

“*You* are not her godmother.” Sooyoung states coldly, eyebrows in a V.

“Well!” Jinsol flares. “Jungeun is, and Jungeun and I are married because she’s my wife and we’re fucking married because she’s my *wife* .” The CEO says to the other CEO, leaning over the table daringly.

“I’m sorry, do you have short-term memory loss? It was cute on Dory and my grandmother with dementia but you just look like an idiot.” Sooyoung snaps.

“You look like an idiot every minute of the day, but I never say anything to you. I just sit here in silence.” Jinsol retorts.

“You might as well euthanize yourself if all you do is sit in silence, at least then you’ll take up less oxygen.” Sooyoung grips the table as she snaps back.

“Okay! Okay!” Choerry cheers very nervously, rubbing her mother’s shoulder. “This is going to be fun! Right?”

Take up less oxygen?! The environment would be saved if businesses like yours became more sustainable! But before Jinsol can get out the words, the door opens again and two more people walk in.

Yeri struts into the pizza parlor holding up a cloud shaped perfume bottle and spraying it everywhere, even on people’s food, before coming to join Choerry and Hyejoo.

“SUPPORT CLOUD BY ARIANA!” Yeri screams into the restaurant, as customers begin to gag on the fragrance that’s diffused in their mouth.

“Yerim *enough*,” Irene snatches the perfume bottle out of her hands and stuffs it into her purse. “I’m going to put a hold on your mother’s credit card if you keep misusing the things she buys you,” she scolds lowly.

Yeri rolls her eyes and makes her way to the reserved table directly beside Sooyoung and Jinsol’s.

Irene takes one look at the two of them at the same table, and becomes so spontaneously exhausted she needs to sigh incredibly deeply.

“Sooyoung,” she says, nodding professionally with a hint of distaste. “Jinsol! How are you?” Irene asks with a smile.

Jinsol smirks at the clear favoritism. “Hi Irene!”

“PREPARE TO DIE!” An old-sounding voice makes everyone in the pizza parlor’s head spin to the door in fear of robbery or some other worse crime. “Oh shit that sounded like a threat. HAHA I just meant like. In Trivia. You suckers are going down!” Yeojin shouts, shooting finger guns at everyone looking at her.

Yeojin walks toward her friends, while Haseul stumbles into the venue behind her.

“Hey Olivia. Choerry. Milfs.” The eighth grader says to the table.

Sooyoung instantly recognizes the familiar word from the title of the recorded video that condemned her to viral infamy.

Wait a second.

Sooyoung gasps hard in horror at the child who isn’t even five feet tall. “*Little Penis?!* ”

Yeojin doesn’t even hear the other CEO, as she’s now chattering with Yeri. Yeojin sits at her table, prompting Haseul to take the empty seat which makes Irene reach for a rattling bottle of pills in her purse.

Jinsol is giggling lowly at Sooyoung’s random outburst. “What?”

“I know you are, but what am I!” Haseul responds to Sooyoung with a giant grin from the other table.

Sooyoung turns, takes one look at her, and turns back around. Before she can confront Lil Peni\$, she is interrupted by a waitress at their tableside. It’s Heejin, ready to take their order.

“Hi, what can I get you guys.”

Sooyoung rapidly scans the menu, as everyone else at the table says their orders. “This is too much carbs.” Sooyoung says to Heejin.

“Umm... We have fish sticks?”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Jinsol interrupts gravely.

Heejin stands awkwardly between the two women who look like they’re about to rip each other apart. “Umm... I’ll give you some time and I’ll come back,” she says with a little smile.

“And why not Greenpeace.” Sooyoung bites monotonously.

“You’re most likely contributing to overfishing and the destruction of an entire ecosystem, considering that those fish sticks are probably made from Atlantic whitefish which have only become more critically endangered in the last decade. Therefore, you making this choice is assisting in the collapse of our already worrisome environment-”

“You guys ready?” Heejin returns after taking Haseul’s table’s orders.

“Jinsol, that was actually very interesting thank you.” Sooyoung looks sincere for once in her life. She turns back to the waitress. “Yes I’ll have the fish,” she says with a sweet smile. “And for this woman next to me a Xanax.”

Jinsol is fuming.

“And some breadsticks!” Sooyoung continues. “You love those, don’t you Jinsol.” Sooyoung is referring to a few months ago during the first PTA meeting of their children’s eighth grade year.

“I love breadsticks!” Choerry smiles brightly at her mother’s side, which redirects Jinsol’s attention and warms her heart as she smiles back.

She’s not even going to respond to Sooyoung; that’s not what tonight is about. Tonight is about her and her daughter, and she’s not going to let her feud with Sooyoung ruin it just like it ruined Field Day.

Heejin leaves with the order.

“SANA!” Haseul shouts across the room suddenly. “LOOK AT THE CELEBRITIES YOU HAVE IN YOUR BUILDING!” she points to Sooyoung and Jinsol.

Sana, the host for the night and the co-owner of the establishment, looks at Haseul from the stage she’s standing on.

“Oh you’re right!” she says into the loud microphone that she’s just turned on, prompting the attention of all the other customers.

“Hey aren’t you the ladies from Milf Smackdown?” Someone says from somewhere in the restaurant.

“I will neither confirm nor deny anything without a lawyer present.” Sooyoung responds, and Jinsol rolls her eyes so far back into her head you can’t even see her pupils.

“MILF SMACKDOWN? I LOVE THAT VIDEO.” Momo, the other co-owner peeks out from the kitchen and moves her dark bangs to see what’s going on. “Sana does a good impression, it’s makes me laugh.” Momo says grinning.

“Yes, it’s like, *Get your hands off me bigfoot you’re crushing my spine!*” The stunningly beautiful blonde woman says in what appears to be Sooyoung’s voice. The audience laughs, but the table with both celebrities is extremely quiet.

“Sana, I don’t think this is a good idea, maybe open up another table…” Irene says, trying to remain as calm as possible even though she has 911 on speed dial ready to go.

“Why? We’re all just friends waiting to play trivia here!” Sana says, her cheery smile wide and eyes gleaming. “Okay well, let’s get this night started shall we!”

All the adults shift quietly except for Haseul, who is clapping like a seal and whooping.

“Welcome to our Parent Child Trivia Night everyone!” Sana says into the mic. “Tonight, all proceeds will help me and Momo’s daughter fund her first ever art gallery! Chaeyoung please come up and say hi!” Sana says, gesturing to the middle schooler’s classmate who was sitting just off the stage near a large whiteboard. Chaeyoung, in a small leather jacket and beanie walks up and takes the mic.

“Hi thank you all for coming and supporting art. I’ll be keeping score.” The eighth grader says quickly before returning to her seat.

“Alright! So here’s how tonight is going to work!” Sana says, as Heejin and other employees begin to pass out little whiteboards to those participating.

“I will be reading a question that has been randomly selected from this jar. You are currently being given one small whiteboard in which you will write your answer to the question on. Whichever team has their whiteboard up first with the correct answer on it receives a point. Whoever has the most points by the end of the night receives free pizza for life! Second and third place, you will not be left out, as there will be giftcards of different prices to our restaurant!” Sana finishes explaining and the crowd claps.

“LET’S GET READY TO RUMBLEEEEE.” Yeojin hoots from her seat and the audience responds with cheers as well. Sana grins and cheers along with them.

“Well you heard her folks! Let’s get started!”

Sana pulls the first question from the bowl of crumpled up pieces of paper and reads it out loud.

“What is the name-”

“HASEUL!” Haseul screams, slamming her fists on the table. Yeojin covers her eyes in embarrassment.

“Um, let’s wait until the end of the questions for answers and make sure to write it on your whiteboard instead of screaming please! Sorry Haseul.” Sana says with soft eyes and continues the question.

“What is the name of the artist who painted the Mona Lisa?”

Jinsol and Irene’s respective groups scribble away as Sooyoung and Haseul sit in silence.

The CEO leans over to Hyejoo’s ear. “Do you know?”

“If I knew I would’ve written it down.” Hyejoo says bluntly, causing Sooyoung to squint at her in offense.

“You don’t have to be so-”

“Irene! Correct!” Sana says clapping, as Irene holds up **Leonardo da Vinci** on her whiteboard. Chaeyoung adds a point for her and Yeri on the whiteboard as the teams erase their previous answers. Sana continues with the next question.

“What year did Elvis Presley die?”

Within milliseconds, Irene already has an answer with her whiteboard up high in the air.

“Wow Irene, again! Incredible!” Sana exclaims from the stage and another point is added to her score.

“Irene! How are you so good at this! You are so sickly!” Haseul says enthusiastically from across the table.

“Sickening. It’s sickening.” Yeojin corrects monotonously from next to her. “But really how are you so good Mrs. Kang that’s kind of hot...” Yeojin trails off, beginning to look Irene up and down.

“She studied for like three days straight after I told her this event was happening.” Yeri says nonchalantly, as if it’s normal for any grown woman to study random trivia questions for a lengthy amount of time.

Irene nods with a serious expression. “Do you know how much money the St. Jihyo’s PTA spends on pizza boxes? Because your principal wants five boxes of Hawaiian to herself?”

Haseul just snickers.

“You’re seriously trying this hard?” Sooyoung asks, turning around to face Irene, suddenly going from couldn’t-care-less to a little threatened. Irene stares fiercely back at Sooyoung.

“I will *never* lose to you again.”

“Okay! Let’s keep this game going!” Sana chirps from the stage, and continues to read more and more questions.

“What planet is closest to the sun?”

Sooyoung creeps over to Irene’s table to try and sneak a peek at what she’s writing when suddenly she gets smacked in the face by a whiteboard.

“OW. What the hell Irene?” Sooyoung says, holding her nose, hoping it wasn’t bruised while Hyejoo has the audacity to start laughing. “I thought you were against violence!”

“We’re not on school grounds. No cheating!” Irene puts it simply and continues writing the answer on her board, but before she can finish Choerry whips up her and Jinsol’s white board.

“MERCURY! That’s correct!” Sana says, pointing to Choerry and Jinsol.

Jinsol looks at her daughter, impressed at how quickly she recalled a fact outside of her middle school curriculum and wrote it down even faster. “That was great Choerry!”

Choerry blushes and smiles. “Thanks mom.”

“Irene. Again. That’s correct.” Sana says, significantly less enthusiastically than the first time she said those words. Chaeyoung adds another point to Irene’s name on the whiteboard.

The scoreboard has Irene and Yeri at 80 points in first place. It should just say Irene though, because Yeri has been up from her seat choreographing her own dance to Carry Out by Justin Timberlake the entire time.

The audience groans as Irene scores yet again, but the fierce trivia queen turns to give them one sharp gaze and immediately the room is silenced.

Following behind in second is Jinsol and Choerry with 40 points. Sooyoung and Hyejoo have 12, Haseul and Yeojin have 0.

Suddenly, Momo comes out of the back room and walks up to Sana on stage, whispering something in her ear. Sana moves back from her wife with wide eyes and a pout, clearly not wanting to do whatever the black haired woman has just asked of her. However, after giving the blonde a quick kiss on the cheek, Momo leaves the stage and Sana takes a deep breath.

“Irene, we are actually going to ask you to stop answering questions now...” Sana speaks quietly into the microphone as Irene looks at her quizzically.

“What do you mean? I trained hard for this night. It is *not* my fault nobody else in this building knows the answers.”

Sana visibly panics before regaining her composure.

“Um yes of course! Which is why you are already guaranteed the first place spot! Good job! Everyone let’s give Irene a round of applause!” Sana says, clapping quickly as the audience is slow to follow.

Irene seems to be satisfied with the response and she nods her head, Yeri giving her mother a high five.

“Alright, now even though the big prize is gone, there are still gift cards on the line so let’s keep going with fresh points!” Sana says, back to normal now that the toughest part is over and the crowd cheers. The woman on stage pulls out the next question out of the bowl.

“If a picture... What...?” Sana reads the paper, clearly very confused by whatever is on it. “If a picture worth a thousand words... how many words is a thousand pictures?” Sana says, a little unsure of what she just said, but a smile on her face nonetheless.

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Sooyoung asks, the rest of the tables just as confused as she is.

“ $\frac{1}{3}$!” Haseul screams holding up her whiteboard with the fraction $\frac{1}{3}$ written on it.

“Correct! I don’t know what... even was the logic behind that! But correct!” Sana says, Chaeyoung adds a point for her.

“How did you know that?” Yeojin asks looking at her mom with her eyebrows narrowed.

“I made it up and snuck a bunch of questions into the bowl when I went to the bathroom.” Haseul whispers to her daughter excitedly. “I knew we could at least get on the scoreboard with it.” She giggles.

“Oh wow, respect.” Yeojin says, fist bumping her mom.

“Next question, what is programmed cell death called in biology?” Sana speaks into the microphone.

Jinsol is about to open her mouth to tell her, but Choerry quickly scribbles **apoptosis** on her whiteboard without even needing to ask her mother.

“Correct! Choerry’s team gets a point!”

“You know about apoptosis?” Jinsol asks, astonished. She didn’t learn about that until briefly in late high school in a very advanced class, then in depth in college.

“Yes,” Choerry says with a smile, casual about it but completely humble.

Jinsol’s immensely proud smile could light up the entire room.

Sooyoung rolls her eyes, huffing at the mother and daughter getting along so well. She looks over at her own daughter whose arms are crossed and is almost falling asleep. Sooyoung pokes Hyejoo roughly, causing her eyes to shoot open.

“Ow stop, stop.” Hyejoo says, swatting her mother away and sitting up.

“Pay attention, do you even want to win?” Sooyoung asks, earning a glare from Hyejoo in response.

“Which Stephen King novel takes place mostly in the fictional isolated hotel?” Sana asks looking out from the stage.

“HA! I know this one.” Sooyoung says as she takes the whiteboard from Hyejoo’s hands. Jinsol tries to write down an answer too, but she just isn’t quick enough. Sooyoung holds up the **The Shining**, causing Sana to squeal.

“Correct! Sooyoung’s team is now on the board!” She says, as Chaeyoung adds a point to their name.

“How did you guys even come up with these questions?” Irene asks, noticing the randomness of the topics being given.

“Oh, we made Momo sit down in a room for four hours and we just wrote down her thoughts.” Sana smiles fondly thinking of her wife. “She had a lot of them.”

“That’s a shock.” Sooyoung mumbles, remembering a time when Jiwoo told her about how Momo rear ended someone in the school parking lot yet again because she zoned out and forgot what she was doing.

“Okay guys, How many hearts do octopuses have?” Sana asks.

“Oh yes yes. Choerry do you remember how many.” Jinsol says in a hushed voice.

“Yeah!” Choerry writes the number **3** down at the speed of light while munching on a breadstick and throws the whiteboard up.

“Yay! Jinsol’s team with a point! Good job!” Sana says excitedly.

“That question was stupid.” Sooyoung mumbles from her seat.

“No, I think that’s just you.” Jinsol smirks, and Sooyoung kicks her directly in the shin under the table causing Jinsol to shriek and Sana to pause in her questions.

“ *Mom* .” Olivia says in a low voice filled with anger.

“Yes?” Sooyoung asks, as if Jinsol isn’t writing in pain. “Is there something you need?”

“Jesus...” Choerry says trying to comfort her mother, as well as trying her hardest to settle the same unnerving feeling she got by her locker returning to her stomach.

“BARK BARK BARK BARK!” Yeojin starts screaming at the sight of another fight possibly breaking out.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.” Jinsol says, trying to stop the tears of pain from coming out of her eyes.

“Of course you are sweetie, because I didn’t do anything to you.” Sooyoung says, Olivia facepalms so hard, the slap causes Sooyoung to wince.

Instead of responding, Jinsol looks at her kid’s nervous face next to her. She could go for round two of Milf Smackdown right here and now with Sooyoung for making her daughter look so worried like this. However, Jinsol swallows her rage and instead pulls her legs toward her to sit criss crossed on her seat.

“Go ahead Sana! Everything’s alright!” Jinsol says, a tightlipped smile as she moves an arm to rub Choerry’s back.

“Ooookay... okay!” Sana says. Turning back to her bowl of questions, she continues, cautiously looking at the competitive women in front of her.

“Alright guys! We’re on the final round of questions and it looks like Sooyoung and Jinsol’s teams will be facing off! Haseul’s team was very close behind with an amazing comeback but unfortunately, they did not make it so everyone give them a round of applause for their efforts!”

The audience claps and Haseul waves, while Yeojin dabs back and forth repeatedly.

Both of them should not have even been close to being up for the second and third place gift cards, but with Haseul’s zany variety of planted questions like “What color is white?” and “What do chickens think we taste like?” It was easy for them to gather up points.

“We have this in the bag, I’ve beaten Jinsol before.” Sooyoung says to Hyejoo, as if that will somehow gain her child’s approval of her acting like a maniac. Hyejoo just shrugs, hoping if she ignores her mother than she’ll stop talking.

“Because you cheated.” Jinsol states matter of factly, crossing her arms.

“Hmm, don’t remember that.” Sooyoung responds matter-of-factly.

“Okay guys this round will actually only be for the kids so can we have you two come up to the stage please!” Sana gestures to Hyejoo and Choerry.

Frozen, neither Choerry or Hyejoo want to move. Jinsol looks at her daughter with beaming eyes and claps to cheer her on. Sooyoung however...

“Well go up there, didn’t you hear her?”

Hyejoo’s jaw clenches, but Choerry pats her shoulder and nods at her. Hyejoo shakes off the urge to fight her mother in the middle of Heart Shakers Pizza Parlor and instead both middle schoolers make their way up to the stage while Yeri and Yeojin whoop encouragingly from their seats.

Sana hands both girls a bell and moves to the side of the stage.

“So, there will be three final questions for you guys to answer and whoever gets two out of three wins! Let’s get started.” Sana pulls out cards from her back pocket.

The girls standing on the stage now are more nervous than they had been all night. Choerry was prepared to answer the questions as fast as possible in order to remove the immense pressure she feels on her shoulders from being suddenly put on the spot. She’s spoken in class before though, numerous times, so she is unsure why she all of a sudden feels so... strange from being in this situation. Hyejoo feels pressured too, except she just wants her mom to stop staring at her like a bloodthirsty animal.

“What is the name of the astrophysicist in the movie *Thor* ?”

Choerry rings the bell slightly quicker than Hyejoo, and Sana nods in her direction.

“Dr. Jane Foster!” Choerry says, and Sana gives her a thumbs up.

“Correct!”

Jinsol applauds happily from her seat as Sooyoung exhales disapprovingly. “COME ON HYEJOO!”

Hyejoo throws up her arms, as if asking her mother what she wants her to do about it. Sooyoung takes a breath, trying her best not to get out of hand. Well, maybe not her best, but she was at least attempting.

“Next question. When was the Atari 2600 released in the United States?”

“ARE YOU KIDDING?” Sooyoung screams from her seat. “THAT’S A STUPID ASS QUESTION WHAT KID WOULD KNOW-” Hyejoo rings the bell.

“1977.”

“Correct!” Sana exclaims, as Hyejoo lifts an eyebrow at her mother from the stage.

“Great question, I never said anything bad about that question.” Sooyoung says backtracking on her previous statement.

“Alright we are tied everyone... here is the final question,” Sana flips to the next card. “In which *Harry Potter* movie does his owl die?”

Choerry looks over at Hyejoo, sure that she’s going to ring the bell immediately. She distinctly remembers a time when the raven-haired girl was in love with the Harry Potter books and movies in their elementary years.

Hyejoo’s face falls instead though. Sooyoung had long since stopped taking her to *Harry Potter* movies by the time the final ones came out.

Choerry remembers all the faces looking up at her on stage, and in a panic just rings the bell to

answer it herself.

“The Deathly Hallows Part 1.” Choerry says.

“That’s right!” Sana cheers, and a disco ball unexplainably descends from the ceiling. The entire crowd is clapping and cheering, Choerry steps off the stage briefly to drag Jinsol by the arm, who laughs with pride, beaming at her daughter who is so smart she barely even needed her help at all. “You did amazing baby!”

“ARE YOU SERIOUS HYEJOO?” Sooyoung yells loud enough to make the crowd go quiet. Jinsol and Choerry freeze on stage, and so does Hyejoo in shame and humiliation.

It’s deathly quiet in the restaurant when Hyejoo bites her lip, and trudges off the stage wordlessly without even taking the prize.

Instead of returning to her mother, she sits in an empty seat by Principal Haseul, who offers her a high five and a *Great job!* unlike her mother who has even more steam coming out of her nostrils at her daughter’s quiet act of defiance.

“WELL WE HAVE OUR WINNERS!” Sana disrupts the silence and holds up a \$100 gift card which she hands to Choerry, then coming down from the stage a \$50 gift card over to Hyejoo.

“Thank you everyone for coming! Irene, please follow me to receive your first place prize!” Sana says, motioning to the side of the stage near Chaeyoung. Irene follows, Yeri waving goodbye to her friends as she walks closely behind.

“Let’s go Hyejoo.” Sooyoung calls, already walking towards the door. Hyejoo sighs deeply, but before she can move Choerry reaches out to her.

“Will you be okay?” Choerry asks with overflowing concern in her eyes.

“HYEJOO, I SAID LET’S GO! NOW!” Sooyoung yells, and some customers contemplate calling CPS. Hyejoo begins to scurry off in her direction.

“I gotta go. I’ll... I’ll see you guys later.” Hyejoo finishes waving to her friends forcing a smile, then exits with her mother, looking terribly afraid as she leaves the restaurant. Jinsol watches with sad eyes.

“Great job nerd.” Yeojin says, patting Choerry on the back and smiling. “We’re going halves on the gift card okay.”

Choerry grins and lifts the gift card into the air, too high for Yeojin to reach. “Mmmm I don’t think so.”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN!” Yeojin jumps, trying to get Choerry to lower her arms but all Choerry does is laugh.

“Yejin, please stop harassing Choerry we have to leave.” Haseul says, causing Jinsol to immediately spin around and look at her daughter protectively.

“IS SHE HURTING YOU. BACK AWAY.” Jinsol points a finger at Yeojin, who’s hands go up in surrender.

“Mom stop we were just playing-”

“THAT’S WHAT THEY ALL SAY.” Jinsol’s voice is stern and loud now.

“That’s what who all say?” Choerry questions.

“YEOJIN ARE YOU HURTING HER?” Haseul screams louder than necessary.

“LITERALLY WHAT DID I DO?” Yeojin yells back.

“OKAY WE’RE LEAVING BYE YEOJIN I’LL TEXT YOU BYE PRINCIPAL HASEUL I’LL TEXT YOU TOO BEST FRIEND!” Choerry waves at the Jos and drags her mother away outside.

They stumble out into the cool night air together, happy.

“Well that was fun, huh?” Jinsol asks as they start making their way to the Tesla in a nearby parking space.

Choerry thinks the night over in her head. Even though she was afraid her Auntie Sooyoung might throw a punch at any point in the night... Choerry knows this was ten times better than *anything* Nayeon could’ve pulled together.

And, she realized just how much she missed being with her mom.

“Yeah mom,” Choerry smiles at her in the golden light of the lamps above. “It was really fun.”

That night, she sits shotgun. Jinsol and Choerry sing the whole way home.

“What the hell was that?” Sooyoung asks her daughter as they get into the Mercedes. Hyejoo doesn’t speak, but instead climbs in the back seat and reaches up to slam the upward-opening door closed forcefully.

“*Hello?* I asked you a question.” Sooyoung looks in her rearview mirror, but only sees Hyejoo putting on her airpods. Yves turns around, prepared to scold even more, but then she sees Hyejoo’s face.

Her cheeks are burning red, eyebrows crumpled downward in a heart sunken expression. She looks out the window, where her eyes glisten ever so slightly that if Sooyoung didn’t know any better, she’d think she was on the verge of crying.

“Hyejoo...” Sooyoung starts, but Hyejoo’s eyes snap forward to look at Sooyoung directly in the eyes.

“I’m sleeping. Stop talking to me.”

With that, Hyejoo turns back to the window, not even attempting to close her eyes and pretend she actually is sleeping.

Sooyoung blinks.

At the sight of her truly saddened daughter, starts to realize just how she had just gone crazy over a stupid Trivia Night. And for what? A fifty dollar gift card?

She would’ve been fine if Jinsol hadn’t shown up. That woman was just so aggravating, she can’t *help* but remember what she had done to her first car without ever apologizing, or how she wanted to bully her until she cried.

But as Sooyoung takes another look in the rear view mirror, she grips the steering wheel, beginning to feel... guilty.

Although she took one step forward by taking time out of her busy schedule to accompany Hyejoo at Trivia Night, she took two, ten, a *million* steps back with the way she acted tonight.

That was bad.

She put the keys into the ignition, bringing the luxury vehicle to life. Slowly, Sooyoung pulled out of the driveway and began their drive home, hoping to God that Jiwoo wouldn't be too mad at her for ruining the day.

Again.

When Sooyoung's Mercedes finally pulls into the Ha estate, Hyejoo runs inside the second the car engine shuts off, bolting straight to her room.

Sooyoung walks slowly to their front door of their modern mansion, still feeling remnants of guilt weighing down on her body.

Upon crossing the threshold, she places her keys in the diamond encrusted bowl and removes her Louboutins, holding them by her fingers as she pads over to the kitchen.

If there's anything Sooyoung needs other than a hug from her wife, it's a glass of wine.

She's pouring herself a small glass of \$225,000 Chateau Margaux when she hears the phone ring from her office far down one of the corridors of the first floor, nearly in their virtually unused west wing. No one calls her on that line unless it's important.

Setting down her glass, she walks over through the long dark hallway. Flicking on the light to her oversized home office, the phone blares loudly on her long desk of polished wood, matching the dark tones that accentuate the office. The CEO crosses the cold black marble floor of the large room to pick up the phone. She notices number on the display screen is not registered as a contact.

"Good evening this is Sooyoung Ha, who am I speaking with?"

"Hello Sooyoung."

The CEO's blood freezes over when she immediately recognizes the voice on the other end of the line. Involuntarily, she stands up straight.

"Mother?"

"Sooyoung. Hello." The older woman says dryly, almost as if not even wanting to have called. *"I just wanted to ask what your plans were for Thanksgiving."*

"How did you get this number?" Sooyoung snaps, resentment spreading throughout her body.

"It was in the books. You should really be more careful about that, just anyone could call you." Her mother says, as if she had ever expressed care enough to contact Sooyoung besides asking for money over the past fifteen or so years.

"Why are you calling me. Did my deposit not go through?"

“Are you having trouble hearing already Sooyoung? I called to ask about Thanksgiving. The two of us wanted to see if you wanted to bring Hyejoo so she could have a chance to meet her grandparents.” The older woman says nonchalantly with a thick Korean accent.

No mention of Jiwoo. Sooyoung is anything but surprised.

“Is my wife allowed to come too? Or have you forgotten she exists?” The CEO snaps bitterly into the phone.

The other end of the line is silent for a beat, but a seemingly strenuous breath is taken before her mother speaks again. *“You can bring Hyejoo.”*

Sooyoung’s nostrils flare at the erasure. “We are *married* mother. She is my *wife*. Which I wouldn’t expect you to remember, considering the both of you completely ignored my wedding,” she retaliates. “We are a *family*.”

“It’s not the same,” Sooyoung’s mother hums casually into the phone.

Sooyoung’s blood begins to boil over. “It’s more of a family than-” She stops herself, barely. *Than you ever gave me.*

“I’m sorry, what was that Sooyoung?” Her mother challenges.

“Why are you sending our daughter things in the mail.” Sooyoung flares, changing the subject.

“It’s not the child’s fault for her parents’ abnormalities.” Her mother states clearly into the phone.

Sooyoung pulls the phone away from ear in pain, fighting the urge to just slam it down and block the number right then and there. But she forces herself to respond. “I provide you both with money whenever you ask for it, even though have been anything but supportive of me- Yet you think you can come into *my* life and send *my* daughter whatever you want because my ‘*decisions*’ are not her fault?”

“She should know her grandparents,” the other woman states simply, not commenting on anything else. *“You know I’m right.”* She taunts ominously.

“You listen to me,” the billionaire says venomously. “You are going to stay the *hell* away from my family. If you even attempt in the slightest manner to make contact with our daughter again, or myself outside of our financial arrangement, I will press charges. You can count on it.” Sooyoung snaps, and without even waiting for a response, she hangs up.

Sooyoung takes a deep shaky breath in the dark office, gripping the sides of her wooden desk with closed eyes as she processes the blood-curdling conversation she just had.

She could definitely use that drink now.

Sooyoung enters her and her wife’s excessively large master bedroom.

Half of their room is elevated up, with a small staircase on the right end to ascend into an unnecessarily giant, luxuriously padded bed. The obsidian wall separating the upper and lower halves of the room is home to an eternally blazing flame on the inside, visible through a thin glass window that horizontally spans the length of the wall.

The other half of the room is simply for lounging, with a dark sofa, hanging flat screen, and desk by the fireplace for when one of them wanted to work but couldn't resist being near the other. On the lower side of the halves, a glass wall is put into place to enjoy their lush nature, which sits adjacent to entrances to their walk-in closets and an exceptionally lavish circular bathroom.

They could stay in their beautiful room forever, and over the years they've definitely been tempted to time and time again.

From across the room on higher elevation, she sees Jiwoo knitting peacefully like she's 85 in the power couple's massive white bed.

"Hi honey!" the celebrity chirps lovingly. "What do you think of this?" she asks with childlike enthusiasm, gesturing to the large material stemming from her hands. "It was supposed to be a scarf, but I didn't want to stop knitting so now it's a blanket."

Sooyoung softens at the endearing sight, despite the insurmountable stress she feels. "I love it," she responds honestly with an endearing smile.

The CEO notices Jiwoo is wearing one of their favorite couple's pajamas in silky pink, so she disappears into her walk-in closet next door to find the other pair to wear to bed.

When she returns back inside with a freshly washed face after her extensive nightly skin care routine, pajamas in hand, Sooyoung crosses over to the end of the room and climbs the five little stairs to meet her wife at the bed. The taller woman rests the sleeping wear on the bed and begins to strip out of her normal clothes.

Jiwoo's eyes perk up from her project at the sight of Sooyoung baring her unblemished milky skin as she pulls off her shirt and removes her bra. "Hubba hubba," Jiwoo says provocatively in a lower tone, biting her lip softly.

Sooyoung looks unaffected, as she slides on the silky pants. She scoffs a little just to humor her wife. Jiwoo can tell something is on her mind.

As Sooyoung lifts their covers to come into bed, Jiwoo is officially concerned. "What's wrong baby?"

Sooyoung crawls under the white covers with a frown, and Jiwoo puts her knitting on the bedside table. The CEO comes closer, and turns sideways to lay her head in her wife's warm lap.

Jiwoo gently runs her fingers through Sooyoung's smooth black hair to ease her beloved's tension. "Tell me what's wrong honeybear," she says softly.

Everyone else on this planet would cringe at the sappy nickname, but Sooyoung can physically feel her heart swell with love. The CEO sighs, letting herself loosen, but the disturbing sudden encounters with her parents *on top* of the guilt from Trivia Night still linger on her mind. "They called."

Jiwoo furrows her eyebrows, knowing exactly who her wife is referring to. "What?" She stops stroking through her hair out of alarm.

"Yes," Sooyoung breathes quietly with closed eyes. "And... They also sent something in the mail. For Hyejoo." She shakes her head in disbelief.

Jiwoo resumes playing with her wife's hair to continue calming her as she discusses this difficult matter, and listens attentively.

"I don't even know how they got our real address. Or my office phone number." Sooyoung tuts in immense irritation. "She wants me to bring our daughter over to them for Thanksgiving, can you believe that?" Jiwoo then thinks she catches a noise reminiscent of a *GRRrr*.

The international superstar massages her wife's scalp carefully, but Sooyoung's eyes are shut in troubling thoughts. "Hey," Jiwoo moves her hand to brush over her wife's cheek comfortingly with her thumb.

"I'm scared, Wooming." Sooyoung admits, ever so quietly, still with closed eyes.

"Honey, we'll just tell them to screen them out of our mail," Jiwoo says calmly.

"That's not what I'm afraid of." Sooyoung replies, leaning into Jiwoo's warm touch. "They know where we live. What if they... *God*, what if they just show up?"

"Pssh. Let them," Jiwoo dismisses nonchalantly. "Then I can finally choke them out!"

(Jiwoo is long past her wife's parents despising her. Her own parents love her, hell, the entire *world* loves her, so she could care less about their senile close mindedness upon their marriage - especially after they made Sooyoung's childhood more of a living hell than it already was on its own.)

"Who's the milf smacking down now," Sooyoung giggles, eliciting laughs from her wife as well.

"Shut up, I'm still mad at you." Jiwoo says, convincing literally no one.

"Also," Jiwoo continues gently. "We do have the best bodyguard in America. Remember when we watched her win Olympic gold in wrestling?"

Sooyoung nods; she has a point, they didn't hire the one and only Eunseo Son full-time for nothing. "True." The CEO exhales hard again. "I just can't believe they're sending Hyejoo things."

"You know, we can get hitmen. We're rich enough." Jiwoo muses.

Sooyoung rolls her eyes in amusement and snuggles into her wife's hips. "Stop," she laughs. (It's true though.)

"Sooyoungie," Jiwoo coos softly, looking down in her lap and cradling her wife's head. "They can't hurt us," she says seriously, rubbing her thumb over Sooyoung's cheek. "You know what they say on Twitter?"

"What?" Sooyoung turns away from her wife's body to meet her eyes.

"They say, '*No cops at Pride! Just Chuu and her sword!*'"

Sooyoung's eyes turn into little crescents as she laughs, and it's the kind of laugh Jiwoo fell in love with all those years ago - her *real* one, bunny teeth and all.

Jiwoo's delicate fingers tuck stray strands of hair behind Sooyoung's ears, and she leans down to kiss her beautiful wife's lips. "I love you," she whispers, in which Sooyoung quickly returns with a smile as her eyes flutter open.

"Now come on," the celebrity pushes the CEO gently out of her lap. "Let's go to bed."

Sooyoung sits up and rubs her eyes in fatigue.

Jiwoo is right. Even though the thought of her parents terrifies her, her family is practically untouchable. Jiwoo always knows how to put all her fears to bed.

The celebrity hits a switch at their bedside, and the lights slowly dim to blackness. Jiwoo comes closer to her wife and cups her soft cheeks for one last goodnight kiss, because she loves her wife but also the smell of Sooyoung's \$2,720 jasmine moisturizing cream with gold flakes that she uses every night.

"How did that Trivia Night go?" Jiwoo asks in the near darkness, only the fire under their bed casting a bit of warm light away from their elevated side of the room. "Did you two have a good time?"

Sooyoung snuggles under her sheets and pulls her wife's body closer to her. "It was..." she cringes a little, remembering the events of the night. "A time."

Jiwoo hums lowly and disapprovingly. "You're lucky I'm tired because I know that can't be good."

Sooyoung can still make out her wife's face in the darkness in front of her, and tucks some hair behind her ear. "Don't worry my love, I'll fix it."

"Mmm," Jiwoo mumbles, and within a minute she is already snoring softly.

Sooyoung's heart swells at the sight of how cute she looks. Laying on her side next to her, she carefully moves to hold her in her arms, a sleeping Jiwoo snug at her chest. And just like that, limbs tangled together and affectionate as ever, they fall asleep - oblivious to their daughter crying in embarrassment in her room.

The next day, Choerry walks into the dimly lit girls locker room at the side of the gym.

It's been almost 24 hours since the student council president had decided Nayeon's menacing order to ditch her new friends. And Choerry hadn't seen her vice president around all day. *Weird.*

A little too weird.

However, the pink-haired eighth grader had definitely been ignoring Nayeon. At lunch with the gang, Choerry positioned herself out of view from her old table's window. Since the two had no classes in common (*thank God*), Choerry was fortunately able to avoid any mandatory interaction.

Correction: the two had no *core* classes in common.

Choerry and Nayeon still had Gym together.

The eighth grader walks through the mostly vacant locker room. Choerry was always one of the last people to get dressed, due to how far her previous class was from the gym.

The dreary room is divided into portions separated by rows of bright yellow lockers, and Choerry makes her way to hers. "Hey guys," she greets the other girls who are changing in her row, a little too uneasy-sounding for her own comfort. The girls return the greeting with casual, friendly smiles.

Choerry is opening up her locker, pulling out her blue gym uniform shorts and shirt when she hears it.

“She is so fucking *stupid*, I swear to God!”

It’s Nayeon’s voice, and it’s coming from the next row of lockers behind hers. Choerry’s head perks up, and her heart stops. The comment is immediately followed by plentiful giggles from what sounds like five or six girls, maybe more.

“Like... I knew she was... *Weird* when I first started hanging out with her. You know what I mean.”

Yeah, yeah, the other girls say just as naturally as leaves follow the current down a stream. And it hurts.

Choerry clenches her jaw and leans a bit into her locker, head heavy and unsure of what exactly to do in this moment. The other girls around her seem to be carrying on, curious as to who the subject of Nayeon’s rant is. Until-

“And just last month she asked me for help taking down and folding the school flag! Like, *come on* Choerry!”

Choerry’s blood runs cold, as what she already knew to be true is confirmed. The other girls have now stopped what they’re doing, and their eyes are all on the subject of Nayeon’s rant. She feels her entire body become hot despite the cool room temperature, and sweat beginning to generate behind her neck.

The feeling makes Choerry want to disappear into the floor and never come out for as long as she lives.

“I helped her obviously because, you know, I’m a good person. But who doesn’t know how to do something as simple as that? I mean,” Nayeon scoffs. “I’ve honestly, like, never met a dumber person in my life.”

Choerry’s fingers clench painfully hard on her gym locker door. She remembers this day clearly; it was her first day on the job, and on top of that Nayeon definitely did not help at all. In fact, Choerry was late to her first morning class because she had to figure it out on her own, while Nayeon attempted to sunbathe in the grass.

“You know I didn’t think she could get any stupider, but then she ditched my party last night for that group of *freaks*. You know, our fucking wack ass principal’s daughter, the wannabe pop stars and that Hyejoo, who *seriously* belongs in a psych ward for depression.”

The other girls laugh cruelly again, and Choerry’s breath hitches as she struggles to be the bigger person and ignore the awful words. But Nayeon’s tirade is far from over.

“I mean come on. Who the fuck does she think she is. I *tried* to save her from stooping to their level, I *swear*. But I guess she’s even slower than I thought,” Nayeon chortles lowly. “And she doesn’t even know what’s best for her,” Nayeon says with a pitiful sigh.

What’s BEST for me?

“You guys want me to be completely honest with you?”

“Yes!” The surrounding girls chime in eagerly from over the wall, as the other girls in Choerry’s row still look expectantly at the pink-haired girl, whose throat feels painfully hollow as she looks back at them.

All the memories the two share in Choerry's mind circle the drain - Choerry helping Nayeon campaign for student council, almost focusing on the other girl more than herself. Choerry being at her beckoning call for years. Choerry, foolishly fantasizing of truly being best friends forever.

"I'm *glad* she's out of my life," Nayeon finishes confidently. "She may be the president and I can't do anything about that. But I only kept her around as my friend because I felt *bad* for her! Like anyone else would take her in..."

Tears rise to Choerry's eyes as the harsh words cut slice right across her heart like the crack of a merciless whip. The girls in her row are still silent and unmoving, just watching. (Acquaintances, not friends.)

No matter how desperately she wants to believe that what Nayeon is saying is a lie, just an exaggeration out of anger, she realizes now that she needs to acknowledge that her words hold a heavy, obvious truth that Choerry was too openhearted and naive to see.

Nayeon was never the friend Choerry had let herself believe she was.

The pink-haired girl feels that familiar feeling in her stomach again, the awful feeling and she feels like her entire world has grown cold and begun to dismantle itself right in front of her.

She turns to the other girls in her row who are looking back at her in anticipation. They don't have to say a thing; Choerry can hear it.

Aren't you gonna do something?

There's only one person who can make this right. She can't sit here and cry behind her locker door, can't look around expectantly for someone else to be her hero right now - not when the other girls are waiting for her to be her own champion.

Choerry is ignited with rage, slams her locker door hard, then storms over the dividing wall of lockers to the daunting other side as her heart thunders violently in her chest.

And then all of them, Dahyun, Jeongyeon, even more girls than she thought, look up at her, like deer in headlights. Nayeon stands with her back turned, until she whips her head around and meets Choerry's eyes. Her jaw falls open, eyes widened in panic.

"C-Choerry-" the taller stutters, suddenly not as brave as she was before.

"What the fuck is your problem Nayeon?" Choerry snaps venomously, and the girls from her row come to watch. The president's hands are balled into fists as she throws every limit she's ever placed on her vocabulary out of the window. "You're so threatened by me wanting to spend time with people other than you that you have to talk shit just to feel better about yourself?"

Nayeon lets out a hollow laugh in panic, smiling fearfully. "Choerry-"

"Maybe if you weren't such a *bitch* all the time, I wouldn't have wanted to stop being around you," Choerry fumes. "All you do is make me feel bad about myself. What kind of friend is that?"

Choerry scoffs and suddenly remembers the rest of Nayeon's comments minutes ago.

"You call them freaks, but they're better friends to me than you ever were." Choerry straightens herself for a dizzy second then fires back again. "They don't talk about me behind my back. They don't *use* me. They don't *make comments about my weight*." She hisses the last words so fervently and Nayeon panics even more as the other girls around her look at her in shock.

“They’re good to me, and-and- being with them is like a breath of fresh air from *you*.”

“Oh boo hoo,” Nayeon rolls her eyes, seemingly unscathed. “They’ll get bored of you soon enough.”

Regardless of the fear those words cause to suddenly bubble up to the surface, Choerry refuses to back down. She can’t be afraid, not now.

“And calling me stupid? *Really* Nayeon? Last time I checked, you’re the one asking for help on homework every night. And you know, maybe you’d get it if your head wasn’t so *far up your ass*.”

Nayeon’s jaw visibly shifts, and her nostrils flare. She chuckles harshly, glaring down right into Choerry’s eyes. “You’re going to fucking regret *ever* speaking to me like that.”

Choerry falters for a split second, recognizing the reality of the situation. Nayeon was dangerous, and Choerry knew that. But she was tired of constant fear, the constant worry about what Nayeon and everyone around her thought. She was supposed to have left that behind along with her old friends.

“Do whatever the hell you want to me Nayeon.” Choerry says coolly, challenging the taller girl in front of her. “I don’t care.”

Nayeon closes her locker suddenly and takes a few steps forward, now directly in front of Choerry and towering over her. The corner of her mouth turns up into a smirk, causing Choerry to feel the pull in her stomach that she had ignored out of anger.

“Oh, I don’t think you should be too worried about yourself Choerry.” Nayeon resting a hand on Choerry’s shoulder abnormally softly. “But it’s great to know that I have your permission.”

With that, Nayeon calmly picks up her granola bar that was sitting on the bench adjacent to her locker, and walks off to the gym entrance leaving Choerry trying to suppress her shaking from the adrenaline rush.

The student body president doesn’t understand at all what happens next. Despite every point Choerry made, but Dahyun, Jeongyeon, and the rest of the girls all scurry off to follow Nayeon, without a single word said to Choerry even though she clearly bested her in that fight.

Choerry is still shaking. And she’s not sure if it’s just the horrible taste in her throat - but the sounds of Nayeon’s ominous last words ringing and repeating in her ear make Choerry feel like she’s about to vomit.

“Look who finally decided to show up!” Yeojin yells from across the gymnasium, oblivious, as Choerry makes her way to her friends. The room is loud with students’ chatter and squeaking shoes reverberating through the air.

“Where were you?” Chaewon asks, Hyejoo at her side. (Yeri, unfortunately, has gym during a different period.)

“Um,” Choerry tries to regain her perfect composure and return to her normal self. “My other class ran late!” she lies, trying to erase the fight in the locker room from her mind as every passing minute seems to convince her more and more that it just made everything worse, that she should’ve just let herself be bullied.

“Well you’re just in time to see Bellatrix Lestrange kiss ass,” Yeojin says, nodding over to Nayeon, who is approaching their unoccupied gym teacher with the granola bar Choerry saw her pick up earlier. “She’s such a clown,” Yeojin laughs.

“It’s this new and super effective protein bar!” They hear Nayeon loudly tell Coach Wonho. “I saw it and immediately thought, ‘Coach Wonho would LOVE this.’” The tall eighth grader says kissing up, batting her eyelashes as the man graciously takes the bar from her and opens it to take a bite.

“Wow, thanks Nayeon! That’s very thoughtful of you!” Wonho says, chomping on the bar.

“No problem Coach! Anything for you!” Nayeon gives a sweet, girly smile before walking back to a larger group of girls.

“Gross.” Hyejoo crinkles her nose.

Yeojin does too. “What, she’s trying to hit on Coach Wonho now? That’s disgusting, especially with the age gap.”

“You literally hit on every woman over the age of 30.” Chaewon deadpans, making Hyejoo chuckle, Choerry managing to laugh a bit despite not being able to shake the uneasiness that’s manifested in both her body and mind.

“That’s different because I actually have a shot.” Yeojin asserts to Chaewon. “WAIT- WAIIT, WOAHH WOAHH WOAHH, OLIVIA-”

“What.”

“ARE THOSE...” Yeojin looks starstruck, and points at the other girl’s new black sneakers. “YEEZYS?!?”

Hyejoo looks down, having forgotten she was wearing them. “Oh. Yeah.” They are, indeed, the newest model of Kanye West’s line of ridiculously overpriced sneakers. “My mom got them for me,” Hyejoo tuts and rolls her eyes, and the three other girls know immediately which mother she’s referring to. “She thinks these can just make up for Trivia Night.”

From her good friend Kanye, Sooyoung had said to her daughter. “They’re even signed.” Hyejoo kicks a sneaker up to show the dramatic signatures on one shoe, then the other, and Yeojin screams loud enough to break the sound barrier.

“Okay guys!” Coach Wonho says, walking to the center of the gym with a giant burlap sack after inhaling Nayeon’s protein bar. “I’m sure you guys have already heard from the other classes, but today’s game is dodgeball!”

Wonho pours out massive rubber red balls from the bag, and the students chatter excitedly.

“Let’s do team captains today in order to pick our teams... let’s have, hmm, Nayeon and...” Wonho scans the room.

“Choerry,” Nayeon assists the teacher with an innocent smile, then turns to look Choerry square in the face, shooting ice through her veins yet again.

“Choerry! Yes, why not.”

Choerry can think of a million reasons why not.

But, again, she wants to be brave, and everyone's watching, so she walks up to take her place at the front a safe distance away from her maniac of an ex best friend.

"Go ahead and pick your teams. Nayeon, you start," Wonho says with a smile.

"Jeongyeon."

"What the fuck Nayeon?" Dahyun's mouth drops open in betrayal at not being picked first. Jeongyeon passes her and palms Dahyun's entire face with her hand to shove her back as she joins Nayeon in the front.

Choerry clears her throat. "Yeojin."

"Expected, I'm the best one out here." Yeojin stands around Choerry.

"Dahyun. I guess."

"Olivia."

"Mark."

"Chae."

Both girls list off classmates until there is no one left. Once the teams are established, the teams move to their respective end lines and Wonho places all the rubber balls on line at half court.

As Nayeon saunters to a position, a blonde girl on her team named Elly runs up to her and tugs her arm. "Nayeon," she whispers hushedly, "I don't wanna do this anymore- It's- It's not right,"

Nayeon looks her up and down and thrusts her arm away from her grip. "Stop being a little bitch Elly. If you don't do this, I'll make sure something *worse* happens to you." the taller girl threatens, and Elly is terror-stricken. She nods compliantly, and reluctantly runs back to her position.

Coach Wonho clears his throat from the bleachers, the muscular man settling into a seat with his clipboard in hand. "You all know the rules!" He's about to blow his whistle to signal start when he notices Jeongyeon sitting next to him blowing bubbles of gum.

"Jeongyeon, aren't you on Nayeon's team?"

The short-haired girl chews for a few silent seconds before coughing very unrealistically.

"I'm sick." She says in the most monotone voice he's ever heard.

Wonho's eyebrows crinkle in confusion but just decides to not deal with it. Instead, he blows the whistle. The kids bolt forward.

Choerry races towards the rubber balls as fast as she can, quickly outrunning everyone on her team due to her natural athletic ability. She reaches the line before most kids, swiping balls to her side of the court for her team.

Another girl on Nayeon's team hurls a ball toward Choerry, forcing the pink-haired girl to bend backwards in order to dodge. The ball misses her by only a few inches.

"Were you in the fucking Matrix or something? That was dramatic as hell." Yeojin says from behind her, blocking balls from hitting her with the one she had in hand.

Then, as sudden and unpredictable as a lightning strike, a ball zooms faster than any other to Choerry's team and almost slams Chaewon in the face. The little blonde dodges it, just barely.

"Relax!" Hyejoo shouts fiercely over the half-court line, alarmed at how intensely hard the ball would have hit Chaewon if it had made intended contact.

And from over the line, Choerry swears she can hear Nayeon say to the unfamiliar boy who threw the ball -

"Not yet."

The comment is so unfathomably ominous, Choerry starts to wonder if she was just hearing things.

But what if she wasn't?

Not yet for what?

Before Choerry even has time to think, the whistle abruptly blows from Coach Wonho on the bleachers. All students are now turned to their teacher, who is now clutching his stomach with a feverish expression. Wonho, sweating profusely, struggles to walk.

"Um-" he interrupts himself with a loud belch and struggles to catch his breath. "I don't feel well everybody... I'm- I'm going to go to the bathr-" Wonho's hand jumps to cover his mouth, and all but one of the kids gasp. "Bathroom," he finishes shakily. "I'm going to the bathroom. Please... Do not play until someone arrives-" he barely coughs out before abandoning the eighth graders the gymnasium, unsupervised.

Jeongyeon watches from her seat as the teacher becomes out of sight. "All clear," she shouts, looking into the hallway.

"Good. Come here." Nayeon says from across the court.

"Nah." Jeongyeon says bluntly. "I was never here," she states, and walks out into the hallway with no further explanation, leaving Nayeon dumbfounded for a beat.

She composes herself though, and turns back to Choerry on the other team, frozen.

"He'll only be vomiting for a few minutes." Nayeon projects her voice as she addresses the other classmates in the gym, a sudden sternness in her voice resembling that of a battle commander. "What are you all waiting for?"

Choerry looks at Hyejoo by her side in confusion, who is giving the same emotion right back. The pink haired girl is about to turn her head to look at Yeojin when two of her own teammates suddenly grab her arms from behind.

"WH- *Get off!*" Choerry thrashes at the sudden unwanted restraint, unable to overpower her classmates without hurting them. "What are you doing?!" Life before her eyes is moving fast, almost nightmarishly so, and Choerry has no idea what is going on.

The classmate restraining her on her right Yeji, looks at her with apologetic eyes. "I'm sorry Choerry," she says, almost on the verge of tears. "She's just so scary."

Choerry's heart is booming so hard that she's afraid she may pass out from fear. She looks around to the rest of the gymnasium to see that Hyejoo and Yeojin have also been restrained.

“IF YOU DON’T GET THE HELL OFF OF ME RIGHT NOW! I SWEAR TO GOD! I’LL FILE FOR SEXUAL HARASSMENT *AND THEN* SEND THE MAFIA AFTER YOUR SORRY ASSES!” Yeojin screams, trying to wriggle from her own captors moving in the same direction.

“GOD GET THE FUCK OFF ME.” Hyejoo is yelling, doing her best to fight off the other students, but there are just too many of them, the rest of the students Choerry chose to be on her team now helping to keep them all down. Hyejoo and Yeojin are dragged to opposite sides of the gymnasium.

Chaewon stands alone, at the center of the court.

The tiny blonde looks to the menacing athletic kids on the other side of the court, now picking up the hard dodgeballs off the floor. Chaewon’s breath hitches in panic, looks around the room for protection or escape, and moves to bolt to the exit when a hand roughly grabs the collar of her shirt.

“Nuh uh uh!” It’s Nayeon. “I think you’re going to stay,” she whispers with a twisted grin growing on her face.

“CHAE!” Hyejoo shouts from the sidelines with her arms tangled in her classmates’, all holding her down with themselves. “HELP! HELP PLEASE! SOMEBODY HELP,” Hyejoo screams at the top of her lungs, louder than most of them have ever heard her speak.

“Shut her up,” Nayeon sneers. “Someone might hear us. Tiny is going to be loud enough.”

A girl’s hand suddenly clamps over Hyejoo’s mouth, muffling her cries for help as she struggles but fails to break free.

“YOU EVIL FUCKING BITCH!” Yeojin screams, before another eighth grader does the same to her. Choerry breathes heavily to fight the tears rising, and the attack hasn’t even begun.

Nayeon grins in her direction, while Choerry looks with tear-filled vision at the monster in front of her. “Don’t,” she pleads, but it only makes Nayeon laugh harshly in response.

“You did this Choerry!” Nayeon tilts her head pitifully. “Don’t worry,” she cooes. “We’re just gonna play some dodgeball.”

The vice president releases her iron grip on Chaewon’s shirt, only to say “Don’t move, or you’ll make it worse for yourself.”

Nayeon returns to her side of the court where almost all of her team remain, red dodgeballs in hand. Chaewon makes fearful eye contact with her friends, with Choerry.

“I’m so sorry,” Choerry can only mouth to the little blonde who shakes in the center of the room.

And easily as ever, Nayeon waves a hand to signal them off.

Instantly, the large eighth graders hurl all their balls directly at Chaewon. She somehow is able to maneuver herself to dodge the first few, but not for very long.

A boy from the basketball team canons a rock hard ball straight at Chaewon’s head, knocking her down roughly to the floor, as her ears ring.

Hyejoo screams deafeningly under her classmates hand at the sight, and tears flow down her cheeks.

Despite Chaewon already being close to incapacitation on the floor, the cruel attack does not cease one bit, the strength of the balls being thrown only increasing in force.

Yejin bites the hand on her mouth, causing the perpetrator to scream in pain. “NAYEON YOU FUCKING PSYCHOPATH! STOP THIS SHIT! SHE’S ALREADY ON THE FLOOR!” Yeojin screams, trying her hardest to break free out of their captivity.

Chaewon is now in a fetal position on the gym floor, hands over head to protect herself as dodgeballs collide hard with her body, hard enough to leave bruises for weeks. A ball strikes her in the back, making her winded.

“*P-Please stop! Please,*” she begs softly with a tight chest, unable to speak any louder. No one hears. Only Choerry from her angle can see the words leave her mouth, and tears flowing down the blonde’s cheeks. Nayeon continues to canon her own dodgeballs at the girl on the floor.

And when one even harder than the rest strikes, Chaewon sobs out heart wrenchingly in pain.

Something snaps inside of Hyejoo in that very moment, at the sound of the cry of the girl she loves. And just like a movie, the raven-haired girl feels newfound adrenaline somehow roar through her entire body.

Hyejoo bites the palm over her mouth and headbutts the eighth grader behind her before he can cry out in pain, removing his grip on her as his hands rush to grasp his broken nose. The enraged girl’s arms are now free, and she swings at the remaining students who try to hold her down.

Dahyun winds up, sending another rock hard ball flying Chaewon’s way as the little girl braces herself yet again for another winding impact.

This time, Hyejoo is there to stop it.

She catches the ball effortlessly, making the entire gym go silent. Before anyone can do a single thing about it, Hyejoo blasts the ball directly back at Dahyun’s face. The impact is the hardest one in the gym so far, knocking Dahyun to the ground, completely unconscious.

Nayeon and her team stand like sitting ducks, frozen.

“Holy shit,” Yeojin barely says before Hyejoo methodically retrieves every ball thrown at Chaewon at a breakneck pace and sends them back to the other team violently. She makes all of her shots; and everyone hit is knocked down to the floor.

As if not wanting the rampaging girl in the court to do the same to them, the classmates begin to release their grip from Choerry and Yeojin. Both girls immediately run to Chaewon on the floor.

“Chae? Chae are you okay?!” Yeojin calls, panicked. Chaewon is unmoving from her protective position. Tears stain Choerry’s cheeks even more upon seeing her usually energetic and optimistic friend nearly lifeless on the floor.

Both girls’ attention is on Chaewon until they hear Nayeon make her worst mistake.

“You’re crazy, Hyejoo,” she laughs evilly, a little out of breath from somehow dodging every shot Hyejoo’s thrown at her. She giggles confidently.

“Crazy, just like your *mom*. ”

Hyejoo’s ears begin to ring, as her eyes go wide in disbelief.

Nearly everyone in the gymnasium stops breathing.

Hyejoo drops the red ball in her hand, letting it bounce to the squeaky floor and roll far away from her. Nayeon smirks in victory, letting her head fall to the side triumphantly.

Until Hyejoo is stomping straight toward the other girl on the other side of the court, Nayeon's smile fading away.

Hyejoo yanks her directly by the collar of her shirt, and she socks Nayeon in the face. *Hard.*

Nayeon crumples to the floor covering her face, but it doesn't stop Hyejoo who begins to swing at her again and again, back and forth, the evil vice president crying out in pain beneath her.

"*Oli!*" Chaewon says weakly from across the room, barely able to hold herself up, needing Yeojin and Choerry's assistance. "Oli, stop," she begs. "Please..."

As if her soul was returned to her body, Hyejoo releases Nayeon, who writhes on the floor.

Nayeon's lip is bleeding profusely as she turns her head to look back up at her. "*You really are.*"

The words haunt Hyejoo, but she picks a battered Nayeon up roughly just to throw her back to the ground. "*Suck my dick.*"

Hyejoo rushes over to the girl she loves the most, who looks awful with teary eyes. Her hands instinctively go to cup her bruised face.

"I-I'm fine, I'm fine," Chaewon says, trying to be tough. The raven-haired girl examines her face with care. "I'm fine," and she launches herself into Hyejoo's arms. Hyejoo's never been so happy to hold her in her life.

"What if you have a concussion!" Choerry asks in fear.

"No, it's not that bad, it's okay," the blonde says in a small voice into Hyejoo's chest, before pulling away. "We need to get out of here though," she says, looking around the gymnasium as the daylight shines through the windows to illuminate the entirety of Nayeon's team on the ground. The rest of the class either made a break for it during Hyejoo's rampage or are on the floor, clutching their heads in fear.

Yeojin nods, then proceeds to lift Chaewon up with the other girls' help, as they carry her to the girls locker room as quickly as they can.

"NAYEON IS THE SCUM OF THE EARTH," Yeojin basically firebreathes, as she paces back and forth in front one of the benches of the girls locker room.

An injured Chaewon rests on the bench, as Hyejoo rustles through her locker for an emergency water bottle. Choerry sits next to them, silent, staring into space.

"YOU KNOW, SHE'S KOREAN-AMERICAN BECAUSE KIM JONG UN AND DONALD TRUMP HAD A BABY."

"They had a baby?" Chaewon asks, resting her pounding head on her hand.

"I'm going to come after her and I am going to fucking kill her. For real. I'll upload her shitty Spanish project commercial on Youtube and make her a meme for the rest of her life. I already

have the traction,” Yeojin spits, referring to her latest YouTube upload which of course, was a worldwide hit. “And I’m going to tell my *mom*-”

“*No!*” Chaewon says suddenly, causing Hyejoo and Choerry to turn and look at her. “No,” she shakes her head. “She can’t know. Then my mom will find out-”

“Chaewon, they need to get in trouble because it’s what they deserve!” Yeojin says back.

“You can’t say anything,” Chaewon says, and the other girls have no idea how the blonde expects that to work when there were 30 other witnesses, and her body is about to be riddled with deep purple bruises for the next few weeks. “My mom can’t find out.”

“Why don’t you want Ms. Wong to know?” Yeojin asks, confused.

“*Because I just don’t, okay!*” Chaewon snaps, making Yeojin go silent. The little girl bites her lip and puts her head in her small hands. “She can’t know.”

It would break her heart.

She looks up at all of them. “Promise me you won’t say anything. If anyone asks, just *don’t* say anything.”

“What are we possibly supposed to say-”

“*Promise* me.” Chaewon says, looking at Yeojin, who takes a shaky, angry breath but gives in to her friend’s wishes.

“...I promise.”

“I promise,” Choerry says hollowly, breaking her silence. Her eyes look lifeless.

Chaewon turns to Hyejoo, who clearly doesn’t want to say the same. “They attacked you Chae. The rest of them are just going to go out and completely erase who started it.”

“Please, Oli.” Chaewon whispers. “My mom can’t know,” she pleads.

Hyejoo doesn’t understand it at all. But she’ll keep her mouth shut somehow, if that’s what Chaewon really wants. Even if it means taking all the blame. “I... I promise.”

Hyejoo can only pray the truth of what happened today in the gym comes out, somehow.

Yeojin shakes her head in disapproval, and notices Choerry’s silence finally. “You’re gonna dump Chad after all of this right?”

Choerry’s head snaps up. “He wasn’t even here,” she defends weakly. “He didn’t even do anything.”

“Are you kidding me Choerry?” Yeojin spits, narrowing her eyes. “You know damn well if he were there he would’ve attacked her too with the rest of his fucking friends.”

“No, he wouldn’t have.” Choerry says with grit teeth, refusing to let herself believe it after everything else she’s gone through today.

“He *would*.”

“Stop fighting!” Chaewon cries from her seat, silencing the student body president and principal’s

daughter. She rubs her temples in stress as the exchange makes her pounding head hurt even more.

“Sorry,” Yeojin whispers.

“I love you guys,” Chaewon says honestly. “But I think I just need some space right now.”

“Are you sure?” Choerry whispers, infinitely concerned.

“Yes, it’s okay, I’ll be fine,” Chaewon insists, shooing them away and even managing a small smile. “Thank you guys.”

“Love you too.” Yeojin huffs. “No homo,” and she smiles back at the blonde.

Choerry wants to smile too, but she just can’t with all the overwhelming guilt eating away inside of her as Nayeon’s words replay in her mind.

You did this, Choerry!

The pink-haired girl breathes an “I’m so sorry.”

Chaewon softens. “Choerry, it wasn’t your fault...” But Choerry can’t believe it.

Yejin takes her belongings to leave the room, Choerry moving to do the same. She doesn’t even have anything to give, no extra snacks or water, nothing but her useless apology.

Hyejoo doesn’t want to leave Chaewon, she *really* doesn’t want to.

“Oli,” she calls weakly, just as the taller girl begins to force herself pack her things. Their eyes meet meaningfully. Chaewon looks genuinely afraid to be by herself. “...Can you stay?”

Chaewon is silent as she finally opens her locker to retrieve her normal clothing and change back. Hyejoo plays with her hands on the bench waiting for her, facing the floor.

Although the two have a lot to say, little to no words have been spoken in the empty locker room over the past ten minutes.

“I’m...” Chaewon begins quietly, making Hyejoo turn to look back at her. “I’m going to go change in there, okay?” she says softly, gesturing to the singular private bathroom a few feet to their side.

Hyejoo nods wordlessly, not breaking eye contact. Chaewon winces a little, but is able to drag her things inside the private room and close the heavy door.

The room has a long bench, toilet, sink, and tiny sliver of a window for minimal light to shine through; it reminds the little blonde of a prison cell. She rests her belongings on the bench and takes a seat, tired even from the minimal motion.

She hisses when she attempts to lift her shirt up. Sharp, unbearable pain shoots throughout her arms, and she brings a hand to her mouth to stifle the yelp.

“Chae?” she hears Hyejoo call out from behind the door. “Are you okay?”

“I-It’s okay, I’m fine,” she replies, trying her best to believe it herself. “I’m okay.”

“Okay, just let me know if you need anything,” Hyejoo calls worriedly.

“Thanks,” she says back, and puts her arms down to rest them for a moment. Chaewon takes a deep breath. Maybe the shirt can wait. She puts the article down, and picks up the jeans she wore to school today, setting them on the bench.

Chaewon hooks her thumbs on the waistband of her shorts, about to remove them, and stands up a bit too suddenly for her to handle. Her head is dizzy, her legs tremble, and before she can get them off, she collapses painfully to the grimy floor.

“Chae?!” Hyejoo calls, even more worriedly than before at the sound of the bang.

The blonde screws her eyes shut and begins to tremble, unable to fight the vicious overflow of tears that have been building up inside of her for any longer. Everything comes up, all at once.

“Chae?” Hyejoo calls again.

“O-Oli?” Chaewon says in a small voice back, just barely penetrating the bathroom door.

“Chae, are you okay?”

Yes, she almost forces herself to say. But she just doesn’t have the strength to pretend she is anymore.

“Can...” She sobs quietly, all the pent up sadness now flowing down her cheeks. “Can you come here please?”

In seconds, Hyejoo is opening the door, and seeing Chaewon crumpled on the floor once again and sobbing. “Oh my God,” she says, heart breaking all over again, and she comes to the floor to very gently scoop up her crying best friend. “Chae-”

Chaewon is sobbing hard into Hyejoo’s chest; she’s not fine, she never was. She’s hurt in more ways than one, she can barely move her body without excruciating pain. And *why*? She desperately wishes she knew what she ever did to deserve this.

The cries are almost noiseless, but they wrack her whole injured body.

Hyejoo carefully helps Chaewon return to the bench, and the blonde immediately returns back into the other girl’s arms.

Hyejoo holds Chaewon as tight as she possibly can. She’s never comforted anyone before, not like this, so she tries her best to think of movies and books. (Or, just what she wished she had last night after trivia.)

The dark-haired girl is a little awkward at first, but she begins to rock them gently back and forth, cradling Chaewon’s head with one hand, and rubbing her back in circles with the other.

She pains hearing the cries, pains thinking of how cruel kids can be, reflecting in disbelief that this could happen to the best girl she knows who is now shaking, broken.

Although the blonde sobs to get it all out, she’s lulled by the steady sound of Hyejoo’s beating heart, and the comfort brought by the other girl’s tight embrace.

By the time Chaewon has cried out all of her tears minutes later, she trembles in the other girl’s arms in silence. Hyejoo runs her fingers through her hair, gently massaging her scalp where she knows the girl was hit.

“Thank you,” Chaewon whispers into the crook of her classmate’s neck, because it simply must be said. She doesn’t even know where to begin, knows she could never say it enough, but she figures she should probably start now. “Thank you so much,” she squeezes Hyejoo’s body as hard as her weak arms can muster.

“Chae,” she says, breaking away to meet the other eighth grader’s big, teary eyes. “I won’t let anybody hurt you again, okay?” the middle schooler says softly with the nobility of a knight, as she brings hesitant, nearly-shaking hands to the other girl’s face to brush away her tears.

Chaewon, with her face in Hyejoo’s hands, smiles up endearingly at the words of chivalry, this valiant act of middle school heroism.

She’ll never forget it for as long as she lives.

Hyejoo smiles back, then pulls the girls delicate form back into her arms. She closes her eyes, and rests her face on the top of her head as Chaewon tightens her embrace. “I don’t know what I’d do without you Oli.”

Hyejoo just pulls her impossibly closer, exhaling into the other girl’s warmth, grateful, even if just for this moment in a girls locker room, to be able to keep her safe.

BEEP! BEEP!

The sound of the blaringly loud intercom suddenly interrupts the two girls, and Chaewon peeks up at the loudspeaker near the ceiling from Hyejoo’s arms.

“Hello. Is this working.” Haseul’s voice reverberates through the entire locker room as well as every other building on campus. **“Secretary Yongsun is this on. I can’t tell.”**

“Don’t you do the morning announcements?”

“Yes but a student helps me.”

“Well is the little light on?”

“What little light?”

“The light.”

“I know but where-”

“THE LIGHT!”

“Ohhhhhohohoh yes haha... L.O.L.... HYEJOO HA TO THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE PLEASE. I REPEAT, HYEJOO HA TO THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE. I REPEAT-”

The intercom stops suddenly like someone cut the wire.

(Last time Principal Haseul called a student to the principal’s office, she *repeated* over into the intercom and refused to stop until the child was right in front of her. She even started singing the words after a while in an operatic fashion. The nonstop booming of her never-ending voice interrupted class everywhere for the longest period of time in St. Jihyo’s history, driving several students and teachers to be hospitalized for complete mental breaks.)

Hyejoo exhales apprehensively, while Chaewon shifts to look up at her awaitingly. “You gotta go,” she says softly.

“I’m not leaving you.” Hyejoo insists.

“No, Oli, I’ll be fine,” she grabs the other girl’s hands with a squeeze. “I’ll be okay. For real this time.”

Hyejoo looks unconvinced. “I’ll text Yeri to come get you. And-” the raven-haired eighth grader rustles through her backpack at her feet. “Here,” she says, handing Chaewon a miniature pill bottle of Ibuprofen that Jiwoo had once given her for emergencies.

“Here’s Ibuprofen for emergencies DO NOT CHEW THEM THEY ARE NOT LIKE CANDY. I tried, worst moment of my life.”

“There are only two left, but it should help, okay?”

“Okay,” Chaewon takes the bottle into her hand. “Thank you, Oli.”

Hyejoo smiles back at her with soft eyes. “And, take this,” she pulls out a black Balenciaga hoodie from her pack. “Can you change back into your clothes?”

“No, it’s- It’s fine, the school day is over anyway,” she says with a frown. “But can you help me put this on?”

Hyejoo obliges, helping a wincing Chaewon slowly lift her arms, then hollowing out the sweater to slide it through as easily as possible. Once her arms are through the sleeves, she looks up at Hyejoo, smiling big in her oversized sweater.

Hyejoo lets go of her hands, then exhales. “I’ll see you later okay?”

“Okay, thank you...” Chaewon looks up at her... and Hyejoo can’t seem to step out of the door she has her foot out of.

The two just stare at each other for a few beats.

“I love you,” Chaewon breathes softly.

“I love you too.”

Principal Haseul squints, trying to keep her eyes from drying out.

She and Hyejoo had been staring at each other for at least five minutes now, and neither one of them had spoken since the principal commanded her to have a seat.

Haseul feared that if she blinked, she would lose some sort of authoritative power, so she’d been struggling to keep them from closing the entire time.

“Well?” Haseul says, leaning forward from behind her desk, attempting to get Hyejoo to finally speak. Hyejoo just looks back at her blankly, shaking her head like she has no idea what Haseul is talking about.

“Are you going to tell me what just happened in the gym?”

Hyejoo fiddles with her fingers, finally breaking the eye contact between the two of them.

“Oh thank GOD I won!” Haseul exclaims and sighs in relief, immediately shutting her eyes and rubbing them. “Hyejoo, you should think about entering a professional staring contest, you’re so good at that.”

Hyejoo still sits in complete silence, and Haseul sighs again, this time, in defeat.

“Okay, come on. You have to tell me what happened. There were at least 23 students on the ground, and 18 of them were unconscious.” Haseul says, her eyebrows knitted together in concern. “And everyone who can manage to speak says that you’re the reason.”

Hyejoo’s gaze moves to the floor, still not offering any explanation. She promised Chaewon she’d keep her mouth shut.

“You know you can’t just go around incapacitating people right?” Principal Haseul swivels a little in her chair. “Life isn’t *Counter Strike*.”

Hyejoo looks up in bewilderment, then breaks her silence involuntarily. “You... You play *Counter Strike*?”

“Yeah add me!” Haseul grins, twirling a pen around in one hand, suddenly switching to a tone of friendliness. “I play on Yeojin’s computer when she’s not home. Found her Fifth Harmony romance fanfiction on there the other day.”

Hyejoo gasps a little, then begins snickering in her seat. “Is it any good?” she chuckles, eager to hear the truth.

“No, I’ve written better.”

Olivia just crinkles her nose and grimaces at the woman in front of her, perplexed, having no idea how to speak to the grown woman in front of her.

“You’re a good kid Hyejoo,” Principal Haseul states casually. “You remind me of myself.”

“Well I wouldn’t go that far.”

“So why don’t you just... Tell me why you did what you did.” Haseul looks at the eighth grader with a serious expression.

Hyejoo sighs. She wants to, she wants to tell their principal all about Nayeon’s evil scheme. But she can’t; she promised.

She takes a large breath and comes up with some explanation.

“I don’t know. I guess I just... It was an accident.” Hyejoo lies through her teeth. “I started throwing dodgeballs at everyone and I guess I threw them too hard.” She finishes, but it’s not enough for Haseul as her eyes narrow.

“Then why would you do it twenty times?”

Hyejoo can’t answer, and looks down at her Yeezy’s.

“Hyejoo.” Principal Haseul huffs, and leans on her desk. “You’ve never done anything violent your entire time at this school. You have stellar grades. And my sources say you’re a great friend.”

Hyejoo smiles a little; her “sources” clearly being Yeojin.

“This is *incredibly* unlike you, especially if it was unprompted. Or so you say.”

“I don’t know. I just did.” Hyejoo lies, fighting the urge to grind her teeth in anger at the thought of what really happened.

Haseul studies the girl over and over. As much as she knows for a fact she’s not receiving the whole story, she has no other leads that were telling her otherwise of what she already knew: Multiple unconscious students, all at the hands of Hyejoo Ha’s dodgeballs.

“Well... since you won’t tell me what else happened... and no one else seems to know at the moment... you’re going to get the blame for it all Hyejoo.” Haseul says, trying to show some consequences in hopes of getting Hyejoo to say the truth, but nothing more is said.

“Originally, I scoped the scene and was like. Yeah that’s a week of detention. And then everyone kept complaining. Like I mean I guess.” Haseul says with a smile. “I’m just kidding. Usually this would call for expulsion.”

Hyejoo feels her stomach drop out of her body, looking up at Haseul in horror. Haseul shakes her hands in front of her, as if signalling that she was not done talking.

“But, I’m not going to do that to you. You’re not telling me the whole story.”

Hyejoo breathes a sigh of relief. “Thanks.”

“Like the other month when Yeojin drained the pool because she ‘suddenly’ developed a chlorine allergy... But I swear she put something in there.”

Hyejoo crinkles her eyebrows. “What?”

“Unimportant. However, since you aren’t telling me the whole story and this falls on you, I’m going to have to suspend you until after Thanksgiving break.” Principal Haseul says, her eyes full of disappointment. “BUT, I won’t put it on your record. At least, not until I know exactly what went on today.”

Hyejoo nods, slightly shaking, understanding the consequences of her decision to hide the truth.

“One of these days,” Haseul sighs. “I hope you can come back here and tell me what really transpired.” Hyejoo lowers her head to avoid eye contact. “Before I just find out myself.” The principal says seriously.

“You’ll have to stay in here until your mom can sign you out. Is she already outside? It is the end of the day.” Haseul asks, picking up her office phone.

“Um no, my babysitter was picking me up today.” Hyejoo says biting her lip. Haseul still looks at her expectantly. “I guess you’ll have to call my mom.” She continues hesitantly.

Haseul nods and shoots her an understanding smile, opens a book of students’ contacts, choosing the sweeter mother of Hyejoo’s.

“Haseul! Hi! How are you!!” Jiwoo says brightly into the phone, picking up after one ring. “Is everything alright? Why are you calling? Is Hyunjin late?”

“Hi Jiwoo... Actually, Hyejoo needs to be signed out by a parent from my office for disciplinary

reasons.” Haseul says. “I’ll explain the rest when you arrive.”

“Oh?” Jiwoo says cautiously. “Alright-”

Before Jiwoo finishes her sentence, some mumbling happens on the other end of the phone. Haseul sits listening, waiting for Jiwoo to return to the call. After a few moments, Haseul speaks up again.

“Jiwoo?” She questions into the phone speaker.

“Yes! Sorry, I’m here- Sooyoung actually just offered to go get her, so she will be the one picking her up.” Jiwoo says hesitantly, as if waiting for Haseul’s response.

“Alright, we will be waiting right here! Thanks Jiwoo.” Haseul says before hanging up the phone. She turns to look at Hyejoo.

“Your mom is coming.” Haseul says, looking slightly nervous.

“Which mom?” Hyejoo asks suspiciously, but by the sympathetic look on Haseul’s face, she already knows the answer.

“Sooyoung.” Haseul says as Hyejoo lies back on her chair.

She’s never wanted to evaporate so badly in her entire life.

“So.” Sooyoung starts, both hands on the wheel as she looks back at her slumped over daughter in the rearview mirror. “Are you going to tell me why you’ve been suspended today?”

Hyejoo makes eye contact with her mom but turns immediately from her gaze to look out the window.

“Did you not hear Principal Haseul’s explanation?” She responds coldly, while her daughter just has her arms crossed in the back seat.

Sooyoung sighs, exasperated, as she shakes her head silently.

“I’m sorry. Let me rephrase myself. Are you going to tell me why you critically injured more than half of your P.E. class?”

Hyejoo remains silent, leaning her head against the glass now.

“*Answer me .*” Sooyoung commands sternly into the rear view mirror, only prompting Hyejoo to roll her eyes.

“Why do you care?” Hyejoo snaps back bravely.

“Why do I *care*?!” Sooyoung flares. “I’m your *mother*.”

Hyejoo lets out a hard laugh. “Oh do the new shoes make you that? Or is it that, now that I got in trouble suddenly you wanna be my mom?”

To avoid slamming the breaks at the back talk, Sooyoung suddenly pulls over to the side of the suburban road so she can turn her head around to look at her belligerent daughter square in the face.

“I don’t have time for your attitude Hyejoo,” Sooyoung snaps quickly and venomously. “*And you*

will not talk to me that way."

"Why not?" Hyejoo asks, voice rising, her tone angrier than ever before. "You talk to everyone else like that."

"That's-" The CEO stutters, dumbfounded, trying to make some sort of excuse. "I'm your mother."

"Wish you weren't." Hyejoo says plainly, right to her face.

It takes everything in Sooyoung not to slap Hyejoo in the face right then and there.

But they just glower at each other, silent, challenging. Sooyoung clenches her jaw with a razor sharp glare, but her daughter just stares right back at her. And she looks unafraid.

Neither Sooyoung nor Hyejoo show it, but the tension in the air at that moment terrifies them both.

Hyejoo cuts through it by turning away to look toward the window.

Instead of making any further comments on the fight they just had, Sooyoung turns around back to the steering wheel, and begins to drive once again to where Hyejoo can only hope is home and not an orphanage.

The long car ride the most deafening silence both parties have ever experienced.

Relief washes over Hyejoo when they finally, *finally* pull up to their front gate and her mother lowers her window to enter the code.

When Sooyoung pulls into their driveway and parks the car, Hyejoo is hastily pulling away her seatbelt so she can leave the vehicle once her mother unlocks the door.

"Wait." Sooyoung commands.

Hyejoo's eyes widen, fear rising within her body.

Hyejoo can think of a million punishments she's about to receive, but she never expects what her mother says next.

"I'm... I'm sorry." Sooyoung manages to say, completely unexpectedly.

"What?"

"Trivia Night. I'm- I'm sorry."

Hyejoo hesitates for a second. For a split second, she makes eye contact with her mother in the rearview mirror. As quickly as it happens, Sooyoung looks down immediately, feeling more vulnerable than she ever wants to feel.

It is so utterly confusing. Trivia Night feels like old news to the eighth grader, considering she was just suspended for nearly putting twenty other kids in comatose.

Her daughter just stares some more in disbelief. She doesn't forgive her at all. But it appears that Hyejoo's mother won't unlock the car door until she says something.

"I guess." Hyejoo mutters.

Sooyoung bites her lip, then unlocks the door.

The door lowers shut once Hyejoo takes off into the mansion, leaving Sooyoung alone with her thoughts once again.

At least that's something. Sooyoung thinks.

Right?

“Hey!” Jinsol greets when Choerry opens the car door to enter the backseat shortly after the normal bell of dismissal.

“Hi,” her daughter says weakly, ever so weakly, and like a dozen alarms firing in her head Jinsol already knows something is wrong.

The CEO tenses at the steering wheel of the parked car, fighting the urge to turn and look her daughter in the eye. Choerry, in the rear view mirror, has her eyes glued to her shoes.

“You don’t want to sit up here?” Jinsol asks gently. She’s started sitting up front ever since Trivia Night.

In the smallest voice she’s heard from her daughter in a long time, Choerry replies with a “No thanks.”

Jinsol has music playing; she set her paired phone to bubblegum pop songs she knows her daughter adores before she left to pick her up after school. But Choerry whispers, “Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Can we turn the music off?” as if the already quiet music is just too loud.

For Choerry though, it is too loud, too overwhelming - she feels like every chord emitted is another sharp blow to her mind, feeling like she’s being suffocated with a blanket of the noise and she’ll scream if it goes on any longer.

It’s all oddly familiar to Jinsol. Somehow.

As the blonde executive puts the Tesla in reverse to back out of the school’s parking lot, Jinsol observes that her daughter, who normally either texts profusely or sings along, is staring off painfully into space on the verge of tears.

“Baby do you wanna stop somewhere?” Jinsol attempts at laying the land. “We can get a smoothie or some ice cream?” She wants to be delicate with this, and hopes she can use the side trip to find out what’s making her daughter so upset.

“No mom, I really just wanna go home.” The words come out voiceless, barely breathed out.

Choerry has no idea what is happening to her right now; all she knows is that she feels mentally and physically sick. She tried to look at her phone, but it was just *more noise*, minimal brightness still too bright. The fact that she has no idea what she’s experiencing makes everything a hundred times worse.

“You caused this, Choerry!” Nayeon’s cruel smile is a vision she cannot tear from the front of her mind.

Chaewon on the floor, beaten down by children's attacks, her crying echoing through the gym, is another.

I caused this.

They hate me. They hate me. Like a broken record, it runs through Choerry's head, a repetition that she cannot silence no matter how hard she tries to convince herself that she can.

She can't seem to keep a group of friends, can she? She tried to leave her old ones in the most gentle way she could, tried to do this for herself, and all it did was get others hurt. She just got new friends, and now she's about to lose them. *I deserve it* she thinks, because she did this. It's all her fault.

No matter what any of them can say, she doesn't believe them.

It's all my fault.

When they finally arrive at their home by the sea, the car slows to a stop in their driveway.

"Sweetie-"

Jinsol is cut off by the sound of Choerry bursting open the car door to flee into the house without an explanation.

Her mother catches her face as she does, and on Choerry's cheeks are heavy streams of tears.

Jungeun, home early, turns from her place on the living room sofa to see her daughter speed walking through the home sobbing. "Choerry?!"

Her daughter ignores her, walking briskly straight to the stairs.

"*Choerry!*" Jungeun calls, incredibly alarmed at how hard her child is crying. She gets up immediately and Jinsol enters into the home, looking to see their daughter now running up the stairs.

"What is going on?" Jungeun asks her wife, who shakes her head, confused and unable to answer, and the two hear the slam of Choerry's bedroom door.

Jungeun rushes up the stairs. Jinsol struggles to keep up.

When the two are approaching the entrance to their child's room, Jinsol tries to stop Jungeun from what she appears that she's about to do. "Jungeun I don't think you should-"

But she's not quick enough, and Jungeun is already opening up the room, taking advantage of the lockless door.

"What's the problem?!" Jungeun questions Choerry aggressively, but Jinsol just knows she's insanely alarmed.

Choerry, at the side of her bed and belongings strewn haphazardly on the floor, is sobbing into her hands. "Please, *please* leave me alone-"

“Choerry *what* happened!?” Jungeun is nearly shouting. “Who hurt you.”

“Mommy p-please,” Choerry whines through her cries. “Please *please* leave me alone,” she begs.

“Choerry you need to tell me what’s going on!” Choerry just cries harder, and whispers something the parents think they hear as *Get out*. Jungeun’s interrogation is cut short by Jinsol wrapping her arms around the shorter mother and directing her away.

“*What are you doing?!*” Jungeun whispers forcefully.

“Come on,” Jinsol replies, slowly getting Jungeun to walk with her with a lot more verbal coaxing.

“I’m not leaving her like this!”

“She needs some space, Jungeun,” Jinsol whispers, and she knows it to be true. Somehow, Jinsol manages to get Jungeun out of the door.

When they shut it, they can still hear their child sobbing behind it.

The chaos makes Jungeun put her face in her hands from being overwhelmed, hating with every fiber of her being the sounds of her daughter in pain as they stand in the hall.

“Jungeun,” Jinsol calls, and wife looks up at her with something like a scowl or a deer in headlights, or both. “Let her have her space right now.”

“*I’m her mother! There is no space!*” Jungeun hisses aggressively in panic.

“Hey- Hey,” Jinsol just rubs her hands comfortingly on Jungeun’s arms, up and down in a soothing manner. “Just for a little bit, babe. She feels really overwhelmed right now,” Jinsol says, thinking of how Choerry wanted absolute silence in the car and didn’t even look at her phone like always.

Her efforts seem to calm her wife, as Jungeun’s tense body slackens just a bit.

“I’ll go in and check on her in ten minutes,” Jinsol promises. “Not a minute more.”

Jungeun is still visibly worried.

Jinsol rubs her shoulders. “She’s gonna be okay.”

And because Jinsol thinks she may just have the tiniest inkling of what’s going on, she says - “I got this one.”

Ten minutes pass before Jinsol attempts to knock on her child’s door, receiving no response from the other side.

Jinsol tapped lightly on the glass of water she was bringing to Choerry as she waits another beat before knocking again, hoping that her daughter just didn’t hear her the first time.

No response.

Jinsol, not wanting to disturb her but needing to know if her daughter is okay, places her hand on the door handle and turns it slowly.

“Choerry?” Jinsol says, treading lightly, her voice low and gentle in order not to startle the child in

the bedroom.

Jinsol peeks into the room and sees a small bump in the middle of Choerry's bed hidden under her purple astro-themed duvet, and Jinsol wonders for a second if maybe the girl has fallen asleep.

That is, until she hears a quiet snuffle coming from near the pillow.

Jinsol creeps forward to the other side of the bed, where Choerry's face is visible. Her face is stained with tears, some still falling onto her cheeks.

Jinsol's heart feels like it's being rung violently when she notices that Choerry has the blankets wrapped tightly around her body, adjusting it every so often to be tighter than what it was before.

Jinsol recognizes the familiar technique instantly, feeling her heart plummet to her stomach.

She walks closer to her little girl, finally gaining the younger one's attention. Choerry just closes her eyes upon the sight of her mother, saying nothing as tears continue to flow down her cheeks.

Seeing her daughter like this completely devastates Jinsol. The middle schooler, usually bright and beaming, suddenly seems so small. It takes everything for Jinsol not to cry along with her and she wishes more than anything that she could just take the pain away.

Instead, Jinsol sits on the edge of the bed, places the glass of water gently on the nightstand, and does the only thing she knows she can.

"I'm going to hug you okay?" Jinsol says, not wanting to make her daughter's mental state worse by smothering her without consent.

Choerry hesitates for a minute at her mother's words, but does not refuse, sitting up slightly to make it easier for her mother to scoop her up and hold her in her arms.

Choerry sobs loudly into her mother's shoulder, and Jinsol holds her tighter than she ever has.

Her desperate cries are so hard to hear; the pain behind it too great for any girl her age to be experiencing. She clings to Jinsol for dear life as she empties her heart.

The pressure of Jinsol's arms around Choerry allows for her to feel just calm enough to try and speak.

"I don't f-feel good mommy," Choerry can barely stutter, hiccuping and gasping for air between tears and words. "I don't know what's wrong with me, I d-don't- I d-don't-"

"Shhh," Jinsol pulls her daughter closer into her as Choerry begins to sob again. "It's okay, we'll figure it out... It's going to be okay." She reassures, rubbing soothing warm circles into her daughter's shaking back over disheveled pink hair.

Choerry settles down eventually, her whimpers slowing to tiny hiccups and eyes going dry. When they do, she slowly sits up from her mother's shoulder and wipes her runny nose with her hand.

"Hey, here," Jinsol calls, grabbing a box of tissues and the glass of water from Choerry's nightstand. The girl blows her nose a few times before taking a small sips.

Once Choerry finishes, Jinsol takes the used tissues and sets them down beside her. Choerry's eyes are red and stinging, her breathing shaky, but much more stable than a few minutes ago. Jinsol is

still rubbing her back as she takes a few more breaths, glad to see that each one is deeper than the last.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jinsol asks softly, looking down at her daughter, whose eyes are nearly shut from being so swollen.

“Not really.” Choerry responds, her voice hoarse from the episode. “I’m so tired...”

Jinsol sees how physically drained her daughter has become, the attack sucking out all of the thirteen year old’s energy.

Jinsol nods. “Okay. Get some rest okay? Call me if you need anything.” She leans over to press a kiss to her daughter’s head for the first time in a long time.

The eighth grader rubs her eyes, and allows Jinsol to tuck her into bed. Jinsol is almost at the door when Choerry says it.

“I love you.” her child says quietly and wholeheartedly, closing her eyes and resting a heavy head on her pillow. In fact, it’s so quiet that Jinsol’s almost sure she hallucinated it.

A small smile blooms on Jinsol’s face. “I love you so much,” she whispers, just loud enough for her daughter to hear. She turns off the lights. “If you need anything at all, call,” Jinsol leaves the door a little open. “I love you,” she repeats once more, before disappearing into the bright hallway.

Choerry is about to fall asleep, when a noise comes from under her pillow.

Bzz.

Sniffing, Choerry goes to turn her phone on silent, but not before seeing an array of plentiful notifications on her phone.

New Messages from TIDDIE JUGGLERS (6)

New Message from Chaewon

New Message from Hyejoo

New Message from Yeri

New Messages from Yeojin (22)

She doesn’t even notice that there’s nothing from Chad.

Choerry unlocks her phone to scan the messages quickly. She sees the TIDDIE JUGGLERS group chat first.

Chaewon: has anyone heard from choerry? she hasn’t responded to my text :(

Hyejoo: no she hasn’t responded to me either.

Yeri: mine either

Yejin: are u fucking serious yeri

Yeri: just tryin to lighten the mood

Hyejoo: choerry if you see this please text us back

Choerry's eyebrows raise at her friends' concern for her. She honestly didn't even think they knew something was wrong, considering all that happened on this horrible day. She closes the group chat and scrolls through the privately sent messages.

Chaewon: hi i know i already told you but i just hope you know that nothing today was your fault. txt me back so ik ur ok. <3

Hyejoo: R u ok

Yeri: u good girlie?

Choerry stops when she gets to Yeojin's thread, filled with many new messages.

Yeojin: hey i hope you're okay, sorry for kinda getting mad at you

Yeojin: i be dumb sometimes

Yeojin: u feel me

Yeojin: not as dumb as nayeon was thinking she could take us am i right

Yeojin: too soon? yea too soon sorry im gonna stop talking now... here maybe this will make you feel better.

Choerry laughed as she scrolled through the rest of the messages, which were videos of Yeojin forcing Haseul to recreate old vines.

"GET ON TOP OF THE FRIDGE. GET UP THERE." Yeojin screams in the video Choerry's clicked on.

"THIS HOUSE IS A FREAKING NIGHTMARE." Haseul says, as Yeojin films her crawling into the tiny space between the fridge and the ceiling. The principal then attempts to get out, but is clearly stuck.

"Yeojin... Please help..." She says, causing Yeojin to go into a laughing fit.

"Okay hold on I'm-" The video cuts before Yeojin can finish.

Choerry smiles at her phone, grateful to have the friends she has, seeming to forget about the giant breakdown she was having a few seconds ago within moments of seeing her friends care for her.

She taps on the text entry bubble and types a response.

Choerry: i'm ok. just really tired. i'll text you all later ok?

Immediately, typing bubbles appear and a new message from Yeojin appears.

Yeojin: ok good we were worried but i'll tell the group ur not dead

Yeojin: feel better chief

Choerry: thank u <3

With that, Choerry locks her phone and puts her head to her pillow. She finally allows the weight of her eyelids to take over as she enters a deep sleep, letting the worries of today fade away.

“What happened? What did she say? Is she okay?”

Jungeun has stopped pacing around the master bedroom to interrogate her wife, who has just returned from a long check up on their distressed daughter.

“I don’t know what happened, but she’s okay. She’s taking a nap.” Jinsol replies, causing Jungeun to continue pacing back and forth in front of the bed.

“What do you mean you don’t know? I’m going to ask her when she wakes up. Maybe I should just wake her up and ask her. I should probably-”

“Jungeun,” Jinsol says, walking over to her wife and stopping her from moving with a gentle grip. “She just didn’t want to talk about it yet. She was very upset and could barely talk anyway.”

Jungeun’s worry only grows, eyes of concern looking into Jinsol’s. “...She was crying that much?”

“Yes... “ Jinsol trails, “She said... She didn’t feel good, and that she didn’t know what was going on.”

“Well we should take her to the hospital? Give her some medicine! Why are we letting her sleep?” Jungeun questions, unsure of her wife’s decision to leave their hurting child alone.

Jinsol swallows hard, trying to contain the uneasiness he was getting herself, the same uneasiness she was sure her daughter had inherited.

She had to tell Jungeun her assumptions. She just fears how her wife is about to react.

“Because I don’t think she has a physical problem with her stomach.” Jinsol says slowly.

Jungeun’s eyebrows come together in confusion. “Then what do you think is wrong?”

Jinsol takes a deep breath and shuts her eyes before answering the question.

“I think she has anxiety.”

Jungeun freezes immediately, eyes widening in fear. She sits down on the edge of the bed, needing to, and Jinsol follows.

Beside the gentle flow of their waterfall pool, the master bedroom is entirely silent.

After some time, Jungeun finally looks back at her wife.

“But... She’s not even a teenager. This... Could probably just a puberty thing right? Or- Just one thing could have happened and it really upset her.” Jungeun searches Jinsol’s eyes for any hint of confirmation as to what she just said and Jinsol wishes more than anything she could give it to her. Unfortunately, she wouldn’t be honest if she did.

“You should’ve seen her in the car,” Jinsol says, reaching for her wife’s hand. “She didn’t want any music playing, not even a slow song. It was like... It was too much noise.”

Jinsol continues. “And when I went into her room, she was tugging on her blanket so it would be

tighter on her so the pressure could ease her breakdown.”

Jinsol watches as Jungeun’s look of confusion transforms into one of realization.

“You do that when you have them.” Jungeun says simply, her face sinking, causing Jinsol’s heart to do the same.

“Yeah.” Jinsol frowns deeply at the thought of being responsible for her daughter’s issues. (Although Jungeun was the one to give birth, Choerry was created with revolutionary new gene editing to combine of both of her mothers’ chromosomes. Jinsol has a diagnosed anxiety disorder; Jungeun does not.)

“She has always been very self conscious about whether or not people like her.” Jungeun says, as if she was going through every moment she had ever encountered with her daughter in order to identify the signs she’s never paid attention to.

“Things are also changing a lot for her.” Jinsol says, watching her wife’s concern grow more and more. Jungeun’s jaw clenches, looking like she’s desperately trying to prevent herself from tearing up.

Jinsol scoots closer to hold Jungeun, the brunette’s arms gripping softly around Jinsol’s as she buries her face in her chest. Jinsol feels her take a deep breath.

“Are you okay?” She asks her wife, pushing her own feelings away for now in order to stay strong for her wife as she processes the situation at hand.

“I’m scared.” Jungeun states simply, before sitting up to face Jinsol again with teary eyes.

Jinsol lifts her hand to caress her wife’s face. “Hey,” Jinsol says, looking into her wife’s eyes. “The good thing is, we have an idea of what’s happening... So we can make sure to handle it appropriately.” The blonde rubs a thumb over Jungeun’s cheek.

“Are we... Do we get her... Meds?” Jungeun asks, and she really hopes not.

“No sweetheart, it’s just been one bad attack. She’s so young too. We just need to really watch now and make sure she’s doing okay.” Jinsol puts her hands around her wife’s waist. “I’ll talk to my doctor tomorrow, just for a second opinion and so we know the best ways to help.”

Jungeun takes a very shaky breath and leans her head on Jinsol’s shoulder, while her wife kisses the top of her head. After a few seconds of silence, Jinsol begins to feel an awful feeling in her insides as she remembers how Choerry could have avoided this had it not been for her.

“I’m sorry.” Jinsol says suddenly, breaking the comfortable silence between the women.

“For what?” Jungeun asks, head still leaning on Jinsol’s shoulder.

“For giving this to her.”

Jungeun sits up suddenly, and looks at her wife. She moves fallen strands of blonde hair out of her face gently, as Jinsol avoids eye contact.

“You didn’t do anything Jinsol. This isn’t your fault.” Jungeun whispers. “And besides, you gave her that beautiful smile and your big genius scientist brain,” she jokes lightheartedly.

“You should have seen her last night, oh my God Jungeun,” Jinsol smiles, remembering Trivia

Night. “She’s so smart...” Jinsol begins to rave about their daughter, citing specific instances fervidly while Jungeun’s heart warms. (It’s all she’s ever wanted, really.)

With that, Jungeun brings their lips together, a soft and warm kiss curing the worry Jinsol had been feeling in her stomach. They pull apart shortly after, Jungeun holding Jinsol’s hands.

“I’m scared, but that’s just because I hate to see either of the people I love the most like this.” Jungeun smiles calmly. “But like you said. We will get through it. I’m glad she has you to rely on and I’m glad I do too. Just like you have me.”

Jinsol shows a small smile. “I love you.” She says, moving her nose so that it boops Jungeun’s.

Jungeun’s nose scrunches and she disconnects their foreheads playfully, but she looks at her wife with loving eyes.

“I love you too.”

Nearly four hours after Choerry had fallen asleep, she wakes to the smell of barbeque wafting in through her slightly open door.

Pulling herself up with care, Choerry steps out of her bed to put on her fuzzy bunny slippers, and heads toward their spiraling stairs around the gleaming blue fish tank.

Once she reaches the entrance to the kitchen, she squints, barely able to keep her heavy eyes open at the bright white light.

“Hi baby,” Jinsol greets, noticing Choerry first as she checks the vegetables in the steamer. Her other mother at the stove cooking chicken strains her neck to see their daughter. Jungeun smiles softly at their daughter, who still looks exhausted even after a four hour nap. Choerry’s hair is smashed up against her head on one side while the other side dangles freely, and her eyes are being rubbed as they try to adjust to her bright surroundings.

“Just in time for dinner.” Jungeun says, turning the stove off as Jinsol takes down plates and walks over to help prepare the meals.

Choerry takes a seat in front of one of the placemats at the table, and soon enough Jungeun joins her, placing a very appetizing plate in front of her. Jinsol, from near the fridge, holds up the option of either mango lemonade or a stray Capri Sun to her seated daughter.

“Can I have chocolate milk please?” Choerry asks in a quiet voice.

Jungeun thinks about the unusual combination of their food with that specific drink, and tries not to openly show her distaste - but the CFO watches as her wife winks at their daughter and quickly pours some out for her into a glass before coming to join them at the table.

Choerry sits at the end of the table with one of her mothers on either of her sides. The eighth grader has taken a few slow bites of her chicken when Jungeun breaks the comfortable silence. “Choerry, we should talk,” Jungeun asks, trying her best not to overwhelm their daughter.

Choerry looks up silently, suddenly anxious again as she waits for her mom to continue.

Jungeun looks extremely worried. “You need to let us know if someone’s giving you a hard time at school,” she states firmly. “We can’t help you if you don’t tell us what’s going on, okay?”

Choerry tenses, unable to break eye contact with Jungeun. She feels as though she might start crying all over again, until Jinsol rests a gentle hand on her back.

“We just want to make sure you’re okay, that’s all,” Jinsol explains, making her wife nod in agreement. Choerry takes a deep breath before looking at the table.

“She didn’t hurt me, she hurt my friends.”

Jungeun’s eyebrows crinkle together. “Who? Who hurt your friends?” She asks, matching Choerry’s soft tone.

The student body president plays with her fork. She thinks a little bit before quietly answering, “Nayeon.”

“Who’s Nayeon?” Jinsol whispers loudly, startling the two girls sitting with her. Jungeun clicks her tongue at her with a bit of an *I’ll tell you later!* glare, but returns back to look at Choerry.

“What happened?”

“I- She...” The summary of today’s events is so difficult to say; Choerry doesn’t want to bring any part of it into her home. “They got really rough in dodgeball. She said... I was the reason she did it, because I stopped hanging out with her. And they really hurt Chaewon.”

Jungeun gasps quietly. “*Nicki Minaj?*”

“Okay- *What* is going on ...” Jinsol’s eyes dart between the two of them, perplexed.

Jungeun grabs her wife’s hand from across the table. “I’ll tell you later sweetie- They physically hurt her?!” Choerry just nods. “I’m going to call your principal immediately. She cannot get away with this.” Jungeun says sternly, but Choerry reaches out to put a hand on her shoulder to stop her.

“No, no please don’t.” Choerry says, panic filling her once again.

“Choerry-”

“I can handle it. Just please please don’t call. It will make things worse.”

Jungeun looks at her daughter, ready to insist on taking measures into her own hands, but she sees Jinsol looking at her in the corner of her eye.

“What do you think?” Jungeun asks her wife. Jinsol’s eyes widen slightly, taking in what Jungeun has just said to her.

“Um.” Jinsol thinks for a few seconds, looking at their very worried daughter. “Are you sure you can handle it? What if we tell Haseul and she gets suspended or expelled?”

Choerry sighs. “Her parents donate a lot of money and she’s one of the best students at school. I don’t think she’s ever going to leave. Plus even if she did, high school is next year and she won’t be suspended from that place.” Choerry says looking back and forth at both her parents.

Jungeun looks at Jinsol, and Jinsol shrugs.

“Look, if you don’t want us to say anything this time, we won’t.” Jinsol says, making sure to look directly at her daughter. “But if she does something like this ever again, you have to tell us. It’s not up for discussion.”

“Okay.” Choerry agrees, and Jungeun stands up.

“We just don’t want anything bad to happen to you baby,” Jungeun says, pulling Choerry in tight.

“I know.” Choerry responds with appreciative eyes, hugging her mother back tightly.

Jinsol watches fondly from her seat, until Choerry extends an arm to her too, and the feeling Jinsol gets is invaluable.

“I love you both so much.” Jungeun says, finding Jinsol’s hand and giving it a squeeze.

“I love you too.” Jinsol and Choerry both say at the same time.

Jungeun holds onto her favorite girls a little longer, afraid for their daughter with this obstacle so unfairly thrown into her young life. But if there’s one Jungeun knows for sure, it’s that her wife and their daughter are the strongest people she knows. They’ll all make it through, now that they have each other.

She's never loved her beautiful family so much.

Chapter End Notes

NOW THAT you’ve read those Hyewon moments... you should go back to the end of Chapter 5... :) - Cat

P.S. This was a LONG ASS chapter so you’re not allowed to leave until you COMMENT your favorite parts that’s right did you really think I would leave before saying it ily readers mwah and i love rting all the MSD memes you all tweet <3

IMMMMM SO happy yall get to read this chapter it means a lot to me and there are so many things that happen and it really is a good set up for whats to come so i hope you all liked it! -daniela

P.S LADIES i went to loonacon and let me just tell you i love them so much the interactions i had... literally a crying today
IMPORTANT, MUST READ: We are college students and school is starting again for the both of us. We will most likely be slower with putting out chapters. Please be patient and do NOT badger us to update, we take time to write this for free and do not owe you anything. Thank you

yeah dont badger us i dont even like badgers lets talk about chipmunks instead

ask us things - curiouscat.me/catmsdqna (Cat)

Candy Cane Lane

Chapter Notes

so here's what you missed on glee. olivia and sooyoung did mom/daughter trivia night with everyone else but sooyoung was an asshole like usual and olivia had a really bad night. nayeon got the entire class to bully chaewon during dodgeball but then olivia took them all out but then got taken out of school. temporarily! lipsoul found out that choerry has anxiety but were super supportive about it and their family is doing great. also haseul made a tinder and vivi got Jealous. and that's what you missed, on *glee!*]

Hi everyone i know it's been a while... Thank you so much to our wonderful audience who waited patiently while we were/are busy with school, I love you guys! <333 - Cat

hey guys omg christmas is almost here and so is my orbit 2.0 kit but then i bought the seasons greetings so this world is just an endless amount of waiting! but not today tho the wait is over have fun reading :p also stream hip by mamamoo - daniela

TW: Homophobia, but there is so much sweetness to make up for it we promise

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The deafening noise of cymbals crashing together blasts through every intercom of St. Jihyo's Presidential Academy at 8AM sharp.

“GOOD MORNING SAINTS!” Principal Haseul roars into the sound system, lowering the full-sized golden cymbals in her hands.

The daily morning announcements have officially begun, evoking groans from all over campus. The assisting student directly adjacent to the principal, however, gives her an encouraging thumbs up. Haseul sends Choerry a thumbs up right back.

“I hope you're all having a delightful start to your morning!” The principal addresses brightly. **“Please stand for the pledge...”**

Students look around in every classroom at each other, puzzled.

“JUST KIDDING, WE'RE A PRIVATE SCHOOL! ...Hahaha. I hate America.” Haseul states plainly into the mic.

“For lunch today,” the principal continues, **“we have freshly made tacos. Friendly reminder to no one in particular YEOJIN that you cannot take extra portions of pudding from the cafeteria and sell them on the blacktop,”**

Meanwhile, Yeojin in first period leans over to her classmates - “I call it the black market.”

“Oh here's an important one!” Haseul moves on. **“A reminder to the staff. Please do NOT leave the kids alone without supervision. Because sometimes things get a little out of control when they're left by themselves and I am bombarded with questions from parents that I**

don't have answers to because their kids aren't speaking! And I'm awake at four in the morning on Thanksgiving night wondering what sick freak of nature invented dodgeball as a sport in the first place because children become injured and-"

"Um, maybe I should take over." Choerry whispers gently to the principal, who's growing more and more irritable talking about the gym incident from weeks ago that she still knows nothing about.

Principal Haseul cuts herself off, and nods in agreement.

"Anyways, here is your president Choerry with some important announcements!" Haseul slides the mic over to the eighth grader next to her.

"Good morning everyone!" The student body president greets energetically into the intercom, reading notecards in her hand. **"Friendly reminder to send your submissions for the yearbook to Yeri Kang via email and not text. This is her official statement: 'I don't know how you all have acquired my contact information but text me one more time and I will be in direct correspondence with the FBI.'"**

Choerry moves on to her next note card. **"Dungeons and Dragons club will be meeting tomorrow-"**

"Oh my God we have that?" Haseul breathes, failing at her attempt to be discreet as the entire school hears her comment.

"...Tomorrow at noon for their board elections-"

"Wait can faculty join?" Haseul asks softly yet again, audible over the intercom. Her daughter Yeojin crinkles her entire face in extreme disgust from her seat in Ms. Wong's classroom.

"Last but not least," Choerry continues, **"Remember that the PTA bake sale is this weekend! Start your winter breaks off right by picking up a cookie to snack on as you walk through beautiful Candy Cane Lane! Baked goods will be sold at multiple stations throughout the neighborhood, so be sure to check it out!"**

Choerry slides the mic back to the principal who moves forward towards it.

"Thank you Choerry!" the principal chirps to the younger girl, excusing her from the room. Haseul turns back to the large microphone. **"Now it's time to sign off with your daily ASMR quote,"** the principal says, while all her students groan dramatically again.

Choerry grabs her things and heads to her favorite class of the day, while Haseul closes out the announcements in whispers.

"She say do you love me. I tell her only partly. I only love my bed. And my momma. I am sorry." Haseul takes a beat before screaming into the microphone again. **"THANK YOU SAINTS, HAVE A GOOD DAY!"**

"May I have everyone's attention please."

"Anyone who uses 'may' is a hardass," Yeojin whispers to her friends before the art class quiets

down out of respect for the unfamiliar substitute teacher.

The short Korean woman (who looks no older than 20 but carries herself like Captain America) approaches the white board as she uncaps an Expo marker with a pop.

MS. JISOO, she writes neatly on the white board. “My name is Ms. Jisoo.”

“Oh my god really?” Yeri asks sarcastically. Snickers erupt.

Ms. Jisoo ignores her expressionlessly and grabs the student roster at the empty desk of Ms. Wong, who is out this morning due to a doctor’s appointment. “We will now proceed to take attendance.”

“I know she be running a McDonald’s like it’s the Navy,” Yeojin says again.

Almost as if on cue, Ms. Jisoo dramatically stops mid-action to frown at Yeojin’s talkativity. After a few moments, Yeojin finally realizes the class has come to a standstill because of her.

“Would you like to *share* your conversation with the rest of the class?” Ms. Jisoo demands more than asks.

“Yeah. I said girl you’re thicker than a bowl of oatmeal and I haven’t eaten breakfast yet,” the eighth grader responds fearlessly, causing the class to burst out into cacophonous laughter. (To Yeojin, substitutes have the same amount of authority as a fly on the wall.)

“Does your mother know you talk like that?”

“My mom is your *boss*, so by *blood* I am too.” Yeojin responds confidently.

Before Ms. Jisoo can tell the child off, a very upbeat, extra-preppy looking Choerry enters through the classroom’s doorway, taking the substitute’s attention off of the class clown.

“Good morning! Sorry I’m late! I’m Choerry! I’m the president of the St. Jihyo’s student council who you heard from the morning announcements-”

“Take a seat,” Ms. Jisoo says dryly, barely even looking at her.

Choerry, who is used to being automatically liked by every authority figure on the face of the planet, is a little taken aback.

“*Where’s Ms. Wong*,” Yeojin bellows in a voice 10 octaves deeper than her own. “*We want Ms. Wong*,”

“Is anyone going to address this...” Yeri says, gesturing to Chaewon, who is fully clothed in black, her hood up, and her face down on the table protected by her arms as if she were having a breakdown. “Is she okay? Are you okay?”

Chaewon, extremely depressed for reasons unknown, doesn’t even bother to lift her head up and answer her friend.

Well, that is, until a familiar face enters into the classroom for the first time in weeks.

Yeojin gasps dramatically, and the entire class’s attention is captured as well. It’s Hyejoo, on her first day back from suspension!

Awkwardly, the dead-eyed eighth grader approaches the substitute and hands her an excuse note. “Hi, sorry I’m late.”

Chaewon's head perks up at the speed of light for the first time since she arrived at school. She gasps a little.

"HYEJOOOOO!" Choerry excitedly hugs her friend at the front of the classroom who has been gone for a few weeks.

"Olivia," Hyejoo croaks out with her face completely smothered in Choerry's fluffy teddy coat.

"OLIVIAAAA!"

"Get back to your seats ladies." Ms. Jisoo says sharply, not caring at all about the reunion.

Yeri pulls two chairs for the both of them to join her, Yeojin, and Chaewon in the back of the room. Due to Ms. Wong's absence this morning, no one is in their assigned seat, and the room's layout is all out of order.

Hyejoo feels millions of butterflies pinball the lining of her stomach at the sight of Chaewon wearing the hoodie she had given her all those weeks ago.

Excited, Hyejoo takes the seat next to Chaewon, who looks up at her with a tear-stained face. It isn't much of a reunion; then again, they've called nearly every day since Hyejoo's suspension.

"What happened?" Hyejoo asks gently, extremely concerned.

Chaewon hides her face in her arms again, but lifts a hand to show the other eighth grader her phone. It's a tweet:

@TMZ: Nicki Minaj Announces She's Retiring from Music

Hyejoo lets out a gasp. "Oh nooo," she says empathetically, giving Chaewon more emotion than she gives most people in an entire day. "I'm sorry Chae..."

The blonde shakes her head into her arms. Then, she suddenly tips her body and falls into Hyejoo's lap, making the other eighth grader turn bright red.

"I missed you," Chaewon mumbles into her lap.

"I missed you too," Hyejoo smiles.

Ms. Jisoo clears her throat with the attendance roster in hand. "Yerim Kang."

"I'm Yeri!" Yeojin says from her seat next to the actual Yeri, as she puts one hand on her ear dramatically. "YyEeeAaAAaaAAAh." Yeojin attempts a vocal run with eyes squeezed shut.

"No I'm Yeri. Listen." Choerry moves her hand through the air in a sassy manner as she attempts her own run. "YeaH yeAh YeeaaHHh."

"No that's not as good you gotta be like: YeeeeEEaaAAaaahHhhHh."

"YeAhHHh yEahHHh."

"YeaAAaAaAAaAaaaH."

Yeojin and Choerry continue to yell ad libs diagonally at one another as both Ms. Jisoo and Hyejoo stare at them in confusion. Yeri raises her hand and Ms. Jisoo looks over at her, the two smaller girls still going in the background.

"I'm Hyejoo." Yeri says, channeling the same demonic voice that she hadn't used since haunted housing.

"What the-" Hyejoo starts.

"Look," Ms. Jisoo begins in an agitated tone. "I don't care who any of you beasts really are. I just need to make sure that everyone is here today. So raise your hand if you're absent."

"Raise your hand if you're absent? Fucking dumbass," Yeojin wheezes, and the whole class bursts into laughter yet again.

Before Ms. Jisoo can breathe fire on Yeojin, Choerry saves the day with a distracting "Three people are absent!" and starts reading off their names for Jisoo to record.

Once the substitute finishes, she huffs dramatically while illegally reaching to put on a pair of headphones. "If the volume of this room becomes any louder than my show, every single one of you is receiving a detention," Ms. Jisoo says, taking a seat at Ms. Wong's desk and pulling out her phone to watch a Jenna Marbles video titled "Corn on the cob but instead of the corn bone it's a hot dog."

Chairs scrape harshly against the tile floor as students adjust themselves to converse with their peers. Choerry, Yeojin, Yeri, and Hyejoo all face each other, Chaewon still snug in Hyejoo's lap below the table.

"Everyone get a tiny piece of paper," Yeojin says, as she rustles through her backpack. "Write your name on it and put it in this so we can pick names for Secret Santa," Yeojin puts a large santa hat in the middle of them. "Also, welcome back John Cena, we missed you queen." She bows her head to Hyejoo, who just rolls her eyes.

"Where the fuck did you even get that?" Hyejoo says, referring to the santa hat. "Do you just carry one around?"

"No," Yeojin says, shooting Hyejoo daggers. "My mom does. I stole one from her office. She literally has fifty santa hats just hanging on her chair."

"I love Christmas!" Yeri says ripping off pieces of paper and generously handing them to the girls around her. "It means the bake sale is coming, and to keep me out of the kitchen, my mom lets my other mom take me out to do whatever I want!"

(Last Christmas, Seulgi took Yeri out to buy her own giraffe. Yeri named it Greedy, after the Ariana Grande song. Irene came home from the store to a giraffe in their backyard.)

"Why doesn't your mom want you in the kitchen?" Choerry asks, writing her name on the piece of paper, folding it up and handing it to Yeojin.

"Have you met my mother?" Yeri says, dropping her name into the Santa hat. "She wouldn't even let Gordon Ramsay in there without her permission. Literally. That was such a weird experience for me..." Yeri trails off as the girls look at her in confusion.

"Okay ladies, let's get these names!" Yeojin aggressively shakes the hat, now filled with the five papers. Once she finishes scrambling the papers, she opens it to let one of her friends choose their gift recipient with their eyes closed.

The five girls draw names, one at a time.

“I would just like to repeat the rules for everyone. Nothing over twenty dollars. No asking your person what they want. AND ONLY,” Yeojin squints directly at Hyejoo and Chaewon in her lap. “Get a gift for the PERSON YOU *CHOSE*. NO ONE ELSE.”

Hyejoo and Chaewon are already talking to each other though. Chaewon sits up to be leveled with Hyejoo, completely forming their own bubble and looking into each other’s eyes with soft smiles.

Yeojin snaps in between their faces to interrupt them. “Hey Eeyore and Piglet, are you listening to me?”

“...Why do we need to know that...?” Hyejoo asks.

“Oh gee, I don’t know, maybe because every time we do Secret Santa you guys always get extra gifts for each other that are always thoughtful and over the top and it makes us all look POOR,” Yeojin huffs, finishing her tirade, as Choerry looks in their direction with wide eyes (even though she is in no way surprised).

“Shut up, we’re following the rules,” Chaewon retorts, putting her own slip of paper with her recipient’s name into her pencil case.

“I’m so excited!” Choerry chirps, looking down at the name on the slip of paper in her hand. “I know *just* what to get. And I didn’t think I was gonna get anything for Christmas this year other than the ones from my family!”

Yeri stops the aggressive texting she was busy with and looks up from her phone, puzzled. “Wait, what? Isn’t your boyfriend gonna get you something?”

Yeojin turns to Choerry in disgust. “He hasn’t gotten you any present? *Ever?*”

“As Mary Magdalene once said, *a scrub is a guy who can’t get no love from me...*” Yeri sings.

“No, it’s not like that it’s just,” Choerry crinkles her eyebrows, turning a bit red from shame. At this point, it’d be easier to defend someone on death row than convince anyone that Chad is a good boyfriend. “He’s just not that great at gift giving,” Choerry says, trying to convince the entire table including herself.

“Choerry. You let his rat ass take your homework from your locker to copy and he can’t even fold construction paper in half and write ‘Merry Christmas’?” Yeojin’s eyebrows raise, and Choerry can feel the other girls’ eyes on her.

“It really doesn’t matter.... Him being my boyfriend is enough of a gift!” Choerry lies through her teeth.

Yeojin sees right through her, but elects not to press any further. “I hate straight people,” the girl mumbles lowly.

“I’m not straight!” Choerry defends.

“You just haven’t found the right man yet.” Chaewon counters, smiling smugly.

“I have a *boyfriend*.” Choerry reiterates monotonously with narrowed eyes.

“I know,” Chaewon says without skipping a beat.

Hyejoo gasps to feign innocence. “He’s a human boy? I thought he was another rat you were

saving from the sewers!”

Choerry sighs in defeat, while Hyejoo smirks triumphantly even though she was already stressing out over her randomized pick. The emo eighth grader takes out her paper and reads the name cursively scribbled in purple ink it once more.

Choerry

It's 10AM later that day when Principal Haseul realizes she's left important paperwork in her car. Stepping out of her plush leather chair, she greets some students passing by with finger guns before exiting through the glass doors of the school office.

At the top of the St. Jihyo's hill, the staff parking lot is located conveniently right around the corner from the main office. Haseul walks humming the tune of 'Mistletoe' by Justin Bieber, which currently booms through the school's external speakers (connected to her Christmas playlist, of course). Christmas season in SoCal doesn't look like the snowy days in movies - it's more like a regular, slightly chillier sunny day - but Haseul never has trouble getting into the holiday spirit.

The short principal unlocks her orange Kia Soul and quickly retrieves the paperwork she was missing. Just as she's stepping out and locking the car again, her attention is stolen by a car's hum approaching her from behind.

The gleaming vehicle happened to be the *very* pretty convertible (a 1959 red Corvette Stingray to be exact) that Haseul had caught a glimpse of and admired in the St. Jihyo's teachers' parking lot, but had never known the identity of its owner. She'd assume Ms. Chungha, if she had to take a guess.

Which is why she nearly chokes when she sees who is behind the steering wheel.

Flaming sleek orange hair, sunglasses below perfect bangs, and the confidence of a fearless driver, Ms. Vivi Wong is pulling her car in smoothly into the spot right next to where Principal Haseul is standing.

The normally soft-spoken, sweet art teacher looks like a sexy Hollywood movie star, and Haseul is staring shamelessly with wide eyes and hitched breath.

Suddenly Haseul is spilling her papers all over the ground. "Oh geez..." she mutters as she scrambles to collect them in a homosexually induced panic.

The low hum of Vivi's Corvette stops, and the art teacher notices Haseul is collecting her belongings from the floor. "Ahh! Do you need help?" Vivi offers generously, removing her rose-tinted sunglasses.

"N-No! No I got it!" Haseul responds shakily, arranging her papers. Vivi, alluring as ever, gets out of the car with a flowing white dress and that captivating warm smile.

Once the principal has her paperwork in order, she meets Vivi's chocolate brown eyes. "This is your *car*?!" Haseul questions.

Vivi giggles a "Yes!" humbly, yet in a way like it was obvious all along. "I thought you knew?"

"Oh my gosh, no," Haseul breathes, gently running her hand along the shiny convertible's door. The vintage car looks good as new. "Did..." Haseul pretends not to know his wretched name for a

few seconds as she tucks some short black hair behind her ear. “Did Nathaniel get this for you...?”

Vivi leans over the car’s back door to grab her purse and lunch bag with a smirk. “His full name is Nathan,” she giggles.

Nathan, Haseul mouths when Vivi isn’t looking, like the principal just swallowed a mouthful of dish soap.

“And no, he didn’t... I’ve had this for many years,” and she leaves it at that, while Haseul stares in awe of how gorgeously maintained the car is. “I missed your voice this morning,” Vivi says quietly.

Haseul really chokes this time. She’s gagging and coughing trying to catch her breath, and croaks out a “What?” Is she dreaming?

“Morning announcements,” Vivi clarifies, soft-spoken.

“Oh!” Haseul smiles as she regains her cool. “Oh yeah. Well, you didn’t miss anything really except that Dungeons and Dragons club is meeting tomorrow, so put that one in your schedule.” Haseul says, earning melodic laughter from her beautiful co worker behind the convertible. “How was your doctor’s appointment...? Any... Cysts?” Haseul adds awkwardly, and has to take a breath wishing she didn’t because *What the hell was that, what on Earth did you just say.*

Ms. Wong is giggling at the ridiculous comment. “Did you just ask me if I have any cysts?”

“...Yes,” Principal Haseul confirms lowly, embarrassed.

“No, no cysts were brought to my attention... Thank you. No one ever asks about the cysts,” Vivi smiles as she cultivates their repartee.

“Oh no problem ma’am.” Haseul replies with a funny voice and a smile.

The two begin to walk together to enter back into the school office as prepubescent Justin Bieber digitally serenades them in the background.

“Secretary Yongsun!” Haseul calls excitedly upon seeing the dark-haired older woman rolling her eyes at the front desk, who was in the bathroom earlier. “My BOY!”

“I am a woman.” Yongsun replies flatly.

“How’s it going homeskillet,” Principal Haseul snickers, Ms. Wong entertained at her side.

Yongsun, however, is not amused.

“Oh come on, I’m just saying hi. I can’t say hi?” Haseul giggles while Yongsun stares at her with an exasperated straight face.

“Is there something you need Principal Haseul.”

“Yes, um. Do you have any more of those strawberry candies behind your desk that old women always have. Ms. Wong always wants to ask for one but she’s too scared of you to ask.”

“Haseul...!” Vivi hisses in embarrassment.

“Yes.” Secretary Yongsun says dryly, then opens a drawer to pull out one, then hands it to Vivi.

“How about one for me queen,” Haseul chortles. Yongsun just stares at her. “Alriiiight.” Haseul winks.

“Anything else,” Yongsun glares.

“No, we’ll go now...”

Yongsun is still giving Haseul no emotion whatsoever, and Vivi has to turn away to keep herself from being seen giggling.

With that, the principal and the art teacher suppress more laughter until they are down the brightly lit corridor to exit the office, like students who had just gotten out of trouble.

Vivi thinks that maybe if she had known Haseul when she was a student, school would’ve been a lot more fun.

“Yeri, what the fuck?”

Yejin was looking at her friend, who had just paraded into the school library in the most obnoxious outfit alive.

Yeri had changed from her normal diva outfit of the day, into something that Yeojin didn’t even know how to begin describing. She had on black leather pants, matching boots, a loose black shirt, and giant circular sunglasses looming over her face.

This normally wouldn’t cause much alarm, except for the fact that she had on a giant black fur coat on that basically engulfed the tiny human’s entire body.

“What?” Yeri says, as if she had been walking around like this all day.

“Why are you wearing that? How are you wearing that?” Yeojin asks, eyebrows knitted together.

“I have extra clothes in my locker in case of emergencies.” She states, as if it was the most obvious fact in the world. “And you told me we were going to talk to Chad so I wanted to dress intimidating. Like a powerful, rich woman.” Yeri says, with light in her eyes and her nose in the air.

“You look like Cee Lo Green.” Yeojin says, making the other girl huff.

“Don’t be mean to me or I won’t help you.” Yeri says in a voice reminiscent of a very accurate Ariana Grande impersonation that greatly contrasts with the raspiness of her friend’s.

“You literally asked me to include you in this, I told you I didn’t-”

Before Yeojin finishes however, Chad enters the room, heading to his usual corner of the room.

Without any of Chad’s friends being in the same study hall as he was, it was as if all two brain cells in the eighth grader’s skull needed a break from functioning. The result? This period was Chad’s nap time, and Yeojin and Yeri usually enjoyed shooting paper balls into his snoring mouth.

Except today, in which the two girls had other plans.

They follow him until he sits down, behind one of the bookshelves just enough to be out of sight of Mrs. Hwasa sitting at the checkout desk. Chad doesn’t notice the girls until he looks up from where he’s sitting. He jumps at the sight. “Wha-”

But before he can even finishes his sentence, Yeojin holds up a finger.

“Your stench is already incinerating my nostrils so we’re going to make this quick.”

Chad tries to speak again, but Yeojin places her hands on the table.

“If you try to release the poison that is your breath onto us one more time, we *will* throw up all over you and that’s a promise.” Yeojin moves back, crossing her arms. Chad is about to protest when Yeri gags exaggeratedly, as if she’s about to vomit.

“Everything okay over there?” Mrs. Hwasa says, leaning in her chair to see the unusual group of classmates.

Yeri turns to give her an innocent thumbs up, and Hwasa goes back to her normal position. Yeri looks back at Chad, who just sits, staring at both girls expectantly.

“Listen,” Yeojin starts. “We’re just here to remind you to get your girlfriend a Christmas present. Because she kind of deserves it don’t you think?” she asks, but it sounds more like a threat than a question.

“I never get her gifts.” Chad barks bluntly. “Because then she’ll expect them all the time, and I can’t do that.”

Yeri slams her fists hard on the table, but it’s muffled by her giant furry coat sleeves. “*Well*, you seem to expect her to do stuff for you all the time and she never complains.”

“Why would she complain about that? She likes helping me study and all that nerdy shit.” The eighth grade boy says, mouth hanging open as if this much conversation is actually frying his brain.

“Look Eric Trump, I don’t know what the *fuck* Choerry sees in you, but apparently getting a gift from your sorry ass will bring her joy. So you better give her something nice. *Or else.*” Yeojin states in a hushed tone, trying not to let her threat be heard from the librarian not too far away.

“Or else what? I’m like 20 feet taller than both of you.” Chad says, crossing his arms.

Yeri slaps Chad across the face so hard it echoes through the entire school building, sending the boy clutching for his cheek.

“What the *FUCK!?*” Chad whispers a little too loudly, causing Hwasa so shush them aggressively from her desk. They wait a beat until they are sure she isn’t looking.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” Yeojin says leaning in close, trying her best not to breathe through her nose. “You’re going to get our good friend Choerry a gift, and as long as you do, we will *consider* not telling your basketball coach that you’re stealing homework from your girlfriend without her knowing. I think that’s punishable by team dismissal, isn’t it Yeri?”

“Yes. And also possibly *death* .” The other girl responds.

Yeojin’s face crinkles up as she looks at her friend in confusion. Yeri shrugs and Yeojin turns back around to sneer at Chad. He makes eye contact with the smaller girl.

“But she knows I’m taking the homework?” Chad says, clearly less confident than he was a minute ago.

“Who’s your coach going to believe?” Yeojin says, eyes squinting at the sweating boy in front of her. “You, or our angel of a class president who’s never had one blemish on her record the entire time she’s been alive?”

Chad sits for a moment in silence, before taking a long sigh and rolling his eyes.

“You bitches are so fucking annoying.” He tries to sound insulting, but his leg shakes under the table nervously at their threat. Chad looks back at them angrily. “Fine.”

“Thought so.” Yeri says, as Yeojin moves back up to a standing position next to her.

They are about to walk away when Yeri turns back quickly.

“Do you know what deodorant is?” She asks, but Yeojin pulls her away before he can respond.

“He’s probably going to Google that word now.” Yeojin chuckles, and Yeri follows in laughter.

“Eduardo smells better than him. And he’s homeless.” Yeri says, and Yeojin stops in her tracks to face her.

“Hey. Never compare Eduardo to that greasy asshole ever again. At least Eduardo can do eighth grade math.” Yeojin says, sending both short girls into giggles.

“Anyway, enough about gross men. Let’s talk about how Mrs. Hwasa is looking fine as hell today...” Yeojin mentions as they get closer to the checkout desk, where the smaller girl is looking the grown woman up and down.

“Oh Jesus Christ.” Yeri says, but before she can even comment on their teacher’s appearance, Yeojin is strutting up to the woman.

“Hey Mrs. Hwasa...” Yeojin says, making her voice three times deeper and winking at the teacher.

Yeri rolls her eyes, but follows her partner of crime in support.

Of course she does. When doesn’t she?

“Do you ever wonder why Fergie was in the Black Eyed Peas with those three men? Like what was the group dynamic?” Haseul asks inquisitively as she takes another stab at her Chinese chicken salad.

Vivi tilts her head to the side introspectively as she finishes a bite of her panini. “I think she lost a bet or something. Like, ‘Haha Fergie, if the Lakers lose tonight, you have to form a mainstream hip-hop group with us.’ You know?”

The two were currently in the teacher’s lounge eating lunch together at their usual round table in the center of the room. Sometimes, they would eat in the art teacher’s classroom because they both preferred privacy and a quieter setting despite how loud they could get sometimes. But today, the teacher’s lounge was peaceful enough since most of the sixth and seventh grade teachers were out on a field trip.

Principal Haseul stops eating to hold her hand up dramatically. “Their song ‘Where Is The Love?’ is something else. First and foremost the song turned me into a human rights activist. I think if we played that song on loudspeakers all over the entire planet I feel like ISIS would just immediately

disband.”

Vivi giggles in endearment. “You’re so crazy.”

“I’m serious!” Haseul says with a smile in response to Vivi’s laughter. “I had a vision about this in the middle of the night. Not a dream. A vision. Like a psychic attack.”

“That’s what keeps you up at night?” The art teacher looks to the principal with a warm gaze, brown eyes with specks of gold from the sunlight shining in from the window.

“Well...” The principal takes another stab at her salad. Haseul can’t exactly say to Vivi that *she* is what keeps her up at night. But ever since the dodgeball incident weeks ago, there’s definitely been more on her mind. “That and some other things.”

Vivi’s eyebrows furrow in concern at the sight of something clearly bothering her friend, then turns over at Haseul’s side to completely face her. “Talk to me.”

Haseul smiles at the gesture. Whenever Haseul happens to be upset over anything, Vivi is always there to be a listening ear. Haseul tells colorful tales of just about every aspect of her current home life - but Vivi, on the other hand, rarely discusses her personal life ever. The teacher is just as mysterious as she is attractive. Haseul has tried to get Vivi about herself before, but was always given short responses; Vivi clearly doesn’t want to dive into it. So until then, Haseul will wait - and Vivi will continue to be there for her.

Haseul blushes just a bit at her forwardness, then looks away to stab her salad once more. “Well you know about the dodgeball thing right.”

Vivi nods. (She doesn’t really, not in all its entirety - all Ms. Wong really knows about that day is that Hyejoo Ha from one of her art classes was suspended for seriously injuring most of the class with dodgeballs in some fit of rage, and that her own daughter Chaewon wasn’t injured at all because of their close friendship. And that’s about all the Principal knows too.)

“Well the parent meetings have not stopped. Sometimes it’s the same ones that come back.” Haseul sighs a little, eyes trained at the coffee machine at the other side of the room. “And... They’re demanding to know what happened. And then, you know, I have to just sit there tell them that I don’t know. Firing Coach Wonho wasn’t nearly enough.”

“Haven’t you interviewed every single kid who was in the room?” Vivi asks.

“Yeah. And *every* kid is giving me the same story. I *know* there’s more to it, I can feel some of them really holding back. But no one is cracking! I’ve even offered them METH. I don’t even *have* meth! And still... Nothing.” Haseul takes a deep sigh. “It’s almost like... Like they’ve all collectively sworn themselves to secrecy.”

What Haseul doesn’t know is that yes, every child in the room had sworn to keep their mouths shut on Nayeon’s plot. Besides the Tiddie Jugglers, every other student who took part in the sadistic bullying had experienced Nayeon raining down a plethora of threats on them - from her very powerful mothers suing them all, to her threatening to do it all over again a hundred times worse to a culprit at the first hint of the beans being spilled.

“I’m sure if anyone can figure it out, it’s you.” Vivi says with unshaken faith. “And even if you don’t, this was not your fault Haseul... You couldn’t have possibly known that was going to happen. Kids go crazy sometimes.”

Haseul tries to smile slightly, but appears more distraught than comforted. Vivi reaches out to place

her hand on top of Haseul's.

"It's going to be okay. Really." Vivi says, rubbing her thumb across Haseul's palm. "These students are your whole heart, and everybody knows that."

Haseul's face flushes at the intimacy and she clears her throat awkwardly. "Well I hope so. Because on top of this, I'm going to have to bake cookies with Yeojin soon, and that child is so bad at any kind of coordination that isn't lyrical."

Vivi takes another bite of her lunch and then sits up.

"Well what if I come over and help when you do? On the day of the fundraiser? Chaewon isn't good at baking either, so maybe we can help each other..." Vivi offers boldly.

"You- Wait, you mean coming to my hou-" Haseul chokes on her salad suddenly.

After a series of coughs and Vivi being very worried, the principal eventually regains her composure. "S-Sure! I'll let you know." Haseul coughs out nervously.

"Sounds like a plan." Vivi smiles in the warm sunlight, causing never-ending butterflies to return to Haseul's stomach. "So, tell me again about the Black Eyed Peas?"

Later that night, Jiwoo Ha examines a price tag on a particularly extra large Christmas tree as the cold wind of the night blows through her hair. Caroling children sing in the background, as she scans the luxury lot of giant Christmas trees.

Crunching footsteps increase in volume from around the corner down another aisle of towering trees, and her beloved Sooyoung reappears, lowering her phone into her black coat's pocket. She rejoins Jiwoo at her side.

"Everything okay honey?" the celebrity asks gently, checking up on Sooyoung who had to take a sudden phone call.

"Yes," Sooyoung responds warmly, and interlaces her bare fingers with Jiwoo's softly gloved ones together again.

Jiwoo resumes her peaceful analysis of the Christmas tree for sale in front of her.

It was late enough for Jiwoo and Sooyoung to go out without needing to call their bodyguard, so while their daughter lounged at home (with Hyunjin's supervision) they had decided to shop again for another Christmas tree. After all, you can never have enough when your house is hundreds of thousands of square feet.

"My grandmother died." The fashion CEO adds with nonchalance.

Her wife immediately turns to look back at her with an extremely alarmed pair of eyes. "What?!" Jiwoo asks loudly, then softens in concern and takes both of her wife's hands in her own to keep warm. "Sooyoungie..."

"It's fine," the taller woman says, in a tone just steely enough to be guarded but just soft enough to let her wife in. She offers Jiwoo a weak, closed-mouthed smile. "She was kind to me. Once in a while," Sooyoung laments as Jiwoo rubs softly gloved thumbs over the backs of her wife's palms.

Wind whistles through the Christmas trees surrounding them. Jiwoo cups her wife's cheek with even more gentleness than she naturally gives to the rest of the world. "Are you okay?"

Sooyoung leans into Jiwoo's touch, and lightly nods her head. "I'm okay," she whispers back calmly. "The funeral is in two days though."

"*Two days?* And they just told you *now*?" Jiwoo's eyebrows knit together in frustration towards her wife's family. "The private jet takes at least half a day to prep! And the flight to Korea alone is going to be—"

"Don't worry, I've already arranged everything. I'll leave the morning after tomorrow. I'll be back before you know it." Sooyoung lifts her hands to cup her wife's cheeks and give her a slow, loving kiss below the Christmas trees.

They come apart delicately, while Jiwoo's eyes flutter open. The celebrity nods with a sigh, their noses gently brushing against each other.

Despite Jiwoo's interactions with her wife's family being little to none, she knows all about the cruelty Sooyoung had experienced throughout her life. Just thinking about it made her bright heart sink.

"You don't have to go baby," Jiwoo whispers against her beloved's lips.

"I want to." Sooyoung's hands rest on Jiwoo's back, keeping her close. "They all think I won't have the guts."

If there's any peak in Sooyoung's life where she wants to show herself on full display, it's now.

Jiwoo's heart hurts with the pain that she knows her soulmate is about to go through, even more so knowing that going with her would only worsen the situation. She wants to tell Sooyoung that she has nothing to prove, that her family will never deserve Sooyoung's hidden but constant longing for their elusive acceptance and admiration - but she has no idea what it's like to not be loved by those who raised her.

"Don't leave me at home alone for too long," Jiwoo says as if her wife is going off to war (well, the reality isn't too far off).

Sooyoung carefully brings her wife's body flush against her own as the children continue to carol in the distance. "I wouldn't dream of it," she says, before connecting their lips once more, taking in the warmth of her angel before she is forced to confront the frigidity of her own bloodline.

The next afternoon, Hyejoo fumbles with her keys to open the front door of her mansion.

She had gotten a ride home from Chaewon and Ms. Wong after the squad decided to make another stop at McDonald's after school. Hyejoo now had plans to ask her more loving mother if the two of them could quickly go to the mall to find something for their Secret Santa gift exchange.

Hyejoo successfully opens the door, flinging her backpack to the side.

"MOOOOM!" Hyejoo yells, only to jump backwards in shock as the mother she *didn't* want to summon appears from right behind the Ha estate's front door.

"Yes?" Sooyoung says, voice completely passionless.

“Jesus Christ,” Hyejoo says, clutching her chest. “Why were you right behind the door?”

“Your mother, um, left her phone on the key table.” Sooyoung responds, awkwardly holding up a bright pink iPhone.

“*HYEJOOOOOO!*” Jiwoo squeals as she runs down the stairs to welcome her daughter home, floral sundress flowing behind her.

She was basically suffocating her little girl in her arms as Sooyoung stood to the side, not really knowing what to do in that moment. “How was school?”

“Mmmpf.” Hyejoo’s voice was muffled into her mother’s breast before she was released from her grip. Ever since she went back to school after being suspended, Jiwoo had been *really* hovering over her every move when she was at home. Hyejoo knew that Jiwoo could tell her daughter wasn’t telling the truth about her suspension, and that Jiwoo was pretty sure that breathing down her child’s neck (literally) was some sort of tactic into revealing the whole story. The only time that Hyejoo got true peace and quiet was when she locked herself in her room.

“I’m fine. It was fine.” Hyejoo says, scrunching her nose after it had been squished into her mom’s body. “I have a question actually.”

“Sure!” Jiwoo says, looking at her daughter with bright eyes. Sooyoung raises an eyebrow next to her, listening in as well.

“Um, I need to go to the mall to get my friend a gift for Secret Santa. Will you take me?” She asks, her voice getting softer the longer the sentence got.

“I LOVE CHRISTMAS SHOPPING!” Jiwoo cheers. “Sooyoungie did you find my phone? I need to text Eunseo if I’m going out in public.”

Sooyoung nods and hands her the phone. Jiwoo immediately starts texting the family bodyguard as the taller woman looks down to make eye contact with Hyejoo.

“Um.” Sooyoung starts awkwardly, and suddenly all attention is on her. “...Can I go... too? I want to spend time with you... two.” She cringes out, looking up at Jiwoo.

Hyejoo slumps slightly at the thought of being in the car with both of her mothers. They’re not exactly the most... comfortable people to go on a drive with.

Jiwoo, on the other hand, grins with eyes illuminated just as bright as a Ha mansion Christmas tree.

“OF COURSE YOU CAN COME! This is gonna be so much fun!” Jiwoo squeals as she pinches the cheeks of both loves of her life at the same time.

Sooyoung smiles warmly at Jiwoo as she claps her hands together.

“Well come on! We don’t have time to waste, Eunseo is meeting us at the mall! Let’s go!” Jiwoo says, grabbing her purse from the key table and making her way to the garage.

Sooyoung and Hyejoo follow behind, and as Hyejoo closes the door to their home she can’t help but say a little prayer for her wellbeing.

She’s going to need it.

Hyejoo really, *really* regrets not bringing her airpods.

Whenever (on the rare occasion) that the eighth grader found herself in the family Lamborghini with *both* of her mothers, she always made sure to bring the earphones to block out their rainbow noise. But the three of them had left the house so abruptly that Hyejoo had unfortunately forgotten the airpods in her school backpack.

And the ride so far without the noise cancellation has made her want to fire roll into moving traffic.

Actually, the trip had been going fairly alright in comfortable silence until Jiwoo took the liberty of turning on the radio.

The host of the radio show finishes her sentence, and an all-too familiar voice rings through the luxury car's speakers.

"Let's take our tiiiiime toniiiiight... GIRL!"

At the sound of Bruno Mars's voice, Jiwoo shrieks and practically chokes on the strawberry banana smoothie in her hand, her hand immediately reaching over to the steering wheel dangerously to grab Sooyoung's hand. The entire car could have crashed in that one quantised moment of chaos, but Sooyoung's once serious expression instantly morphs into a smile.

"Please change it, please change it," Hyejoo begs from the back, knowing that the performance she's about to involuntarily receive is going to be 300 times more cringe-worthy without the buffer of her airpods.

"THERE'S NO PLACE I'D RAAAAAATHER BE IN THIS WOOOOOORLD!" Jiwoo belts out perfectly, her volume overpowering the radio's completely. *"YOUR EYES ARE WHERE I'M LOOOST IN!"*

"UNDERNEATH! THE CHAAAAANDELIER! WE'RE DANCING ALL ALOOOONE!"

Sooyoung has now joined Jiwoo in performance, the married couple singing cringey lyrics in unison while Hyejoo buries her head in her hands and groans in the backseat.

"Please no," Hyejoo begs one more time, but Jiwoo turns around happily to their daughter and begins to tickle her from the front seat, making Hyejoo scream and retract in horror. Sooyoung finishes the verse with her elegant and light singing voice that is unexpectedly pleasant considering how much of the day she spends barking at her subordinates.

"SO BABY LET'S JUST TUUURN DOWN THE LIIGHTS, AND CLOSE THE DOOOR! OOOOOOOOooh I LOVE THAT DRESS BUT YOU WON'T NEED! IT!

AAAANYMORE!!!" Jiwoo growls the last sentence animalistically at her wife in the driver's seat.

"Hi if anyone is seeing this message I just want everyone to know," Hyejoo says into her Snapchat video recording, "that I am going to kill myself. I am going to-" Hyejoo is cut off by her mothers singing even louder to the sexually-charged anthem of the year.

"NO YOU WON'T NEED IT NO MORE, LEEET'S JUST KISS 'TIL WE'RE NAAAAAKED, BAAABY, VERSACE ON THE FLOOR!"

The beat drops, and Jiwoo is now trying to twerk nonsensically in the car seat, lifting herself out of the seat and holding onto the grab handle above her for some type of support. Hyejoo screams in horror.

“OOOOOO TAKE IT OFF FOR ME, FOR ME, FOR ME, FOR ME NOW GIRL!” Sooyoung sings. “Versace on the floor!”

“This is a Nieman Marcus.” Hyejoo states dryly, as the eighth grader, her two billionaire mothers, and their Olympian bodyguard stand in the middle of the high-end department store, which is no place to find a gift under \$20.

Hyejoo looks at the extremely ugly sweater next to her and picks up the price tag just to prove her point, and cringes at the value reading **\$4,260**.

“Yes? And why are you upset?” Sooyoung cocks her head, taken aback.

Civilians walk by, some timidly lifting their phones to take pictures of the superstar family in between the racks of clothing.

“There are plenty of beautiful gifts to get her here,” Sooyoung says sweetly in her honeyed, privileged tone. The CEO briefly scans a rack of dresses, then picks out a particularly lovely one. “You can just get her this,” she says, holding it up in the air.

“Honey it’s gorgeous!” Jiwoo swoons, tone deaf to the fact that the gown is for a fully grown adult and not a fourteen year-old girl. “I love when you *pick things out*,” the celebrity says to Sooyoung with an erotic tone of voice and a wink.

“This is so disgusting oh my God,” Hyejoo gags and turns away.

Just then, an unknown middle-aged man is seen running towards the family in their peripheral. “*CHUU! CHUU! CAN I HAVE YOUR AUTOGRAPH! CHUU!*”

Before he can get any closer, Eunseo grabs the man by the collar and throws him at full force onto a clothing rack, breaking the metal contraption with a loud crash and sending the stranger and all the dresses to the floor. Chuu waves at the fan who is now on the floor, as Eunseo returns to her position, silent and on watch.

“That dress is literally for a middle-aged woman.” Hyejoo says, not minding the commotion at all (it definitely wouldn’t be the first time this has happened). “Also it’s way too expensive...?”

Sooyoung squints her calculating eyes at her child in disapproval. “Nothing is too expensive for us Hyejoo.”

“Which one of your friends are you getting a gift for anyway? Is it *who I think it is*...” Jiwoo teases, while Sooyoung narrows her eyes yet again in exclusion from this secret between them.

“NO,” Hyejoo says too aggressively with a furious blush. “IT’S- It’s Choerry,”

“CHOERRY!” Jiwoo chirps excitedly, her voice echoing through the quiet department store. “I LOVE CHOERRY! I LOVE JUNGUN! I LOVE JINSOL!”

“Get her a new mother,” Sooyoung hums under her breath.

“Oh gee, if I knew how to get one of those I would have done it already for myself,” Hyejoo glares at her taller mother.

“Do *not* start with me in this *store* Hyejoo-” The CEO growls.

“OKAY!!! OKAY,” Jiwoo smiles and laughs nervously, putting her hands on Sooyoung. “Then she should be used to getting expensive gifts!” The bubbly woman changes the subject, referring to the Kims’ massive fortune.

“Well we all agreed not to spend more than twenty dollars.”

Sooyoung gasps dramatically. “*Under twenty dollars?!?*” Sooyoung looks like she just witnessed a hate crime. “What could you *possibly* buy for under twenty dollars!? A *rag?!?*”

“I think you can get... Like... one pair of socks?” Jiwoo supplements innocently.

“*You can’t even buy a singular diaper for less than twenty dollars!*” Sooyoung hisses, much louder now.

Hyejoo’s eyebrows knit together in confusion. “Where are you buying your singular diapers?”

“I’ll tell you *what* Hyejoo. For twenty dollars we can go to Cheesecake Factory and TAKE A *MINT* FROM THE COUNTER, HOW DOES THAT SOUND.”

The woman was speaking so loudly, that now that she was finished, the entire store had gone completely silent; even customers from relatively far positions were looking on at them. Sooyoung doesn’t even stop until she just so happens to notice the way Jiwoo was looking at her.

As their eyes meet, Jiwoo glares at Sooyoung, *hard*, but soon removes eye contact to look at her child sympathetically. “I know the perfect place to get something for under twenty dollars don’t worry.” Jiwoo says calmly.

Without another word, Jiwoo takes Hyejoo’s hand and walks out of the store. Sooyoung, slightly ashamed, follows behind them.

“I’m just saying you didn’t have to yell at her.” Jiwoo says, as she walks her family to the opposite end of the high-end shopping mall. The peeved celebrity speaks to her CEO wife in a hushed tone as to not let their daughter, preoccupied by her iPhone, hear her.

“It was unnecessary, I know,” Sooyoung says, trying to keep up with Jiwoo, who was just walking way too quickly. “I-... I’m sorry-”

“I’m not the one you need to be telling that to.” Jiwoo replies concisely.

Sooyoung sighs. It *was* unnecessary to yell... But she *was* just speaking the truth. Before she can finish her train of thought though, Jiwoo stops abruptly after exiting a pair of the mall’s sliding glass doors.

“We have arrived!” The bright celebrity cheers into the open Beverly Hills air, chilly afternoon wind blowing through her hair.

Both Hyejoo and Sooyoung stand in silence in front of the brown and cream colored building, before Sooyoung decides to be the one to break it.

“Honey, this is a CVS Pharmacy.” Sooyoung says seriously as the wind blows through her perfect hair. “This is not even apart of the mall.”

“So? They have so many things inside! Like Oprah magazine! THAT’S A GREAT GIFT!” Jiwoo

struts inside happily, rosy pink designer purse swinging around her arm, while her girls stay behind very confused.

Nevertheless, both family members (and their suited bodyguard) follow the superstar inside.

The four women walk into the building in style seemingly out of this world, and customers of all walks of life stop what they're doing to take in the unexpected sight of stars in the flesh in their lowly CVS. The ones who don't look up are too busy reading magazines in which Jiwoo and Sooyoung don the covers of. The building's aura is an odd mixture of familiar and clinical, which takes Sooyoung aback considering this is the first time she's ever been to a normal American pharmacy in her life.

A very large banner hanging from the ceiling catches the group's attention.

FLU SHOTS HERE

Jiwoo gasps in glee with a little cheer. "I love those! They're still doing them!"

Hyejoo narrows her eyes at what her mother just said. "What?"

"Yes, I get one every time I come here!"

"*WHAT?!*" Hyejoo exclaims, eyes as wide as can be in alarm. "You get a flu shot *every time you come here*? HOW ARE YOU STILL ALIVE?"

"I am immune." Her celebrity mother responds nonchalantly before her volume begins to increase. "Sneeze in my face. Do it. DO IT-"

Jiwoo and Hyejoo are interrupted by Sooyoung's heels clicking softly against the thin gray carpet towards them. The taller mother carries a pack of feminine care pads in her hand with a straight face, and hands them to Hyejoo. "You can give these to your friend. She menstruates, right?"

Hyejoo slams a palm to her face.

"Or are neither of you of menstruating age," Sooyoung continues.

"I MENSTRUATE! GOD!" Hyejoo clarifies very loudly in the CVS for all nearby customers to hear.

"Fine, what about this," Sooyoung holds up a sizable bag of-

"*Dog food?!*" Hyejoo cannot believe her eyes.

"Well your mother showed me a picture of her and she resembles a small dog anyway." Sooyoung replies plainly.

"That picture was Chaewon honey, not Choerry," Jiwoo clarifies.

Their eighth grader fumes with grinding teeth, but feels the need to change the subject immediately. "Did you know Mom gets a flu shot every time she comes here?"

The CEO's eyes widen at her wife in immense panic. "SWEETIE!? YOU TOLD ME THOSE WERE BUG BITES ON YOUR ARM!"

"I said they *looked* like bug bites because they do!" Jiwoo defends casually, then looks to an employee a few aisles away. "WAITER!" she calls.

The middle-aged employee turns to look at them with a perplexed expression.

“Excuse me sir, do you have anymore O magazines in the back?” Jiwoo asks.

“Erm. No, I don’t think so.” He says bluntly, and quickly walks away seeing Eunseo eyeing him for being just a tad closer to the family than five feet away.

The internet star’s face crumples together in yet another pout. “He didn’t even check the back...”

“Do you want me to order you O magazine sweetie pie? I thought you already had a subscription.” Sooyoung says, pulling out her phone regardless to place an order.

“Why would I even give another eighth grader Oprah’s magazine? You guys are so hopeless!” Hyejoo sighs, throwing her hands up in defeat and rubbing her eyes.

“Hey, your mother and I are trying our best alright.” Sooyoung looks up from her iPhone to make eye contact with Jiwoo at her side, except she isn’t there. “Um, where... where did your mother go?”

Hyejoo opens her eyes and looks around her. Neither Jiwoo nor Eunseo are anywhere in sight in the whole pharmacy.

“Mom?” Hyejoo says, beginning to walk through the snack aisles, and Sooyoung walks to the cosmetics section.

“Honey?” Sooyoung calls loudly, moving through the aisles hastily until she runs directly into her daughter. “Oh God, where did she go?” Sooyoung says, taking out her phone once more about to call her wife.

“Hey,” Jiwoo says from directly behind her daughter and wife, scaring them both. Eunseo is positioned professionally behind her.

“Where were you?” Sooyoung asks, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Well, the worker didn’t check the back, so I wanted to see for myself.” Jiwoo explains. “But I went to the back and didn’t find anything. Just a few big dumpsters and a couple of trees.”

Silence.

“Did... Wait... The back room, or the back of the... building?” Hyejoo hesitantly asks.

“Yeah!” Jiwoo says, neglecting to answer the prompt. “There’s like nothing back there, I don’t even know how they can restock!”

Both Sooyoung and Hyejoo look at Eunseo quizzically, who just shrugs. “My job is to follow her around.” The bodyguard says sternly.

Sooyoung opens her mouth to say something after a pause, but Jiwoo has already started scanning the pharmaceutical area right behind them. She picks up a pill bottle.

“What about this!” She says holding it up to show Hyejoo.

“Mom why would I give her Advil.” Hyejoo squints.

Jiwoo looks at the bottle and shrugs. “I don’t know what you kids are popping these days...” She looks around, and her face brightens. “Maybe there’s something cooler in there!” the celebrity

says, pointing to the pharmacy office door that leads to the stock of people's prescriptions.

"Honey," Sooyoung starts.

"Mom, no," Hyejoo says at the same time.

Neither one of them stop Jiwoo from walking directly into the office and grabbing a clinically sealed bag off the shelf.

"This looks so cool!" Jiwoo says holding up a shot of insulin.

"Excuse me ma'am, you cannot be back here." An older gentleman in a white coat approaches Jiwoo, trying to take the bag from her. However, the celeb's grip is so relentless that Hyejoo has to step forward and unclasp her fingers.

The man finally has the bag in his grasp. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to ask you to leave the store."

Jiwoo just smiles sweetly. "I'm sorry but do you know who I am?"

"No?" The older man says, looking her up and down.

Hyejoo leans over to her mother. "So what now?" She whispers.

"I don't know, no one's ever said no before." Jiwoo whispers back.

"Ma'am this is a CVS," the employee says.

"MA'AM THIS IS A WENDY'S!" Jiwoo yells back at the man nonsensically.

"NO, THIS IS A CVS, AND YOU NEED TO LEAVE."

"I'm sorry is there a problem sir?" Sooyoung asks, her authoritative executive voice showing itself.

"Yes, this deranged woman is trying to steal drugs. I'm going to have to kick you all out of the store."

"Did you just called my wife *deranged*? I'm sorry, but do you know who we are?" Sooyoung counters.

"I DON'T KNOW WHO ANY OF YOU ARE!" The man screams frustratedly, flailing his arms around. "GET OUT OF THE STO-"

Suddenly, Eunseo tackles the man forward like an attack dog for raising his voice, and the two crash into the giant aisles of prescription while the shelves begin to fall backward noisily in a domino-like manner.

"Oh my God," Hyejoo says, overwhelmed at all the commotion her parents are causing. "Mom, we need to go-"

"ATTENTION CITIZENS OF CVS PHARMACY, THIS IS CHUU SPEAKING." Jiwoo has now taken control of the intercom on the pharmacy's counter to boom her voice throughout the entire store. She then violently pulls the fire alarm on the wall next to her, as sirens ring through the store and sprinklers spray water all over the products. "EVACUATE THIS STORE IMMEDIATELY. THERE IS A MASSIVE CONSPIRACY HAPPENING HERE. THIS STORE IS BEING RUN BY LIZARDS. THERE IS NO BACK."

“Oh my *God* we’re leaving,” The microphone screeches as Hyejoo grabs her mother from behind to pull her away from it. Employees and customers panic as they start to run out of the store, not even understanding Chuu’s orders but following their favorite celebrity’s commands blindly.

Hyejoo manages to pull Jiwoo away from the counter with Sooyoung’s help, and the three make their way to the emergency exit soon enough.

Entering the open Southern California air as the CVS alarms go off behind them, the three and their bodyguard watch as everyone fully evacuates from the CVS. Some even do the famous Chuu apple heart right at Jiwoo, in which she immediately returns with a big smile.

“Stay safe everyone!” Jiwoo shouts back. “Beware of fake news!”

Meanwhile, Sooyoung trails her hand down her wife’s back to randomly palm her ass. “You got all of those people to leave CVS... That’s so hot.” Sooyoung admits quietly, causing Jiwoo to wriggle her eyebrows suggestively back at her wife.

Suddenly, Hyejoo flops facedown onto the sidewalk. Both mothers look at their daughter with concern.

“Hyejoo!? What’s wrong!?” Jiwoo says, bending down to see her daughter more clearly. Hyejoo turns over.

“Nothing. I just needed to control the situation and didn’t know how else to do that.” Hyejoo says solemnly. She sits up. “Can we go to a store that I pick now?”

Jiwoo and Sooyoung side eye each other, but both nod, helping their daughter up so their middle schooler can lead them through the mall.

“Why is there a cave in the mall?”

Hyejoo had finally stopped walking in front of a dark store with black walls and gothic decor; Sooyoung stands very confused.

“This is a Hot Topic.” Hyejoo says.

“Caves are a hot topic? Teenagers don’t make any sense.” Sooyoung says bluntly.

“Look at the sign hag.” Hyejoo says, rolling her eyes.

“What did you just call me-” Sooyoung barks back, not being able to stand her own daughter.

Jiwoo pats Sooyoung’s arm excitedly. “Baby, I know this place!” She says, basically jumping up and down.

“You do?” Sooyoung and Hyejoo say in unison.

“YES! I have a deal with them look look look!” Jiwoo points inside the store at a section with her face on a giant sign above the shelves. She runs inside to view it, and her family follows.

In the section are various objects of Chuu merchandise. Socks, shirts, pencil cases, backpacks, even earrings with different emojis resembling the internet sensation.

While both of her parents were ogling Chuu’s display, Hyejoo walks to the other side of the room,

quickly deciding on a small plush toy that she knows Choerry will like. She nods in agreement with what she's chosen and goes to the counter where she is about to wave over her mothers, but only registers Sooyoung staring at the wall of fandom t-shirts in disgust.

"Where-" Hyejoo starts, but Jiwoo appears quickly next to her carrying various items with her own face plastered all over them.

"Are you ready to check out? Me too! HONEY!" Jiwoo calls for Sooyoung's attention, and the elitist CEO walks over to them carefully, making sure not to touch anything on the way as if the products were contagious with troubled teen disease.

Exiting the store after completing checkout, Hyejoo holds her small bag and Jiwoo holds multiple large ones all with items of her own brand.

"Alright, are we ready to go home?" Jiwoo asks happily, looking down at her daughter.

"Thank God." Sooyoung says, beginning to pull out the car keys from her purse. However, Hyejoo's foot is twisting on the floor to point in another direction.

"Um, actually," She says shyly, looking anywhere but her parents' eyes. "I need to get another present."

"For who?" Sooyoung asks, squinting her eyes as Jiwoo tilts her head in curiosity.

"Uh. It's for someone else." Hyejoo says basically whispering, not able to stop her cheeks from heating up. Jiwoo notices, and gasps.

"FOR YOUR GIRLFRIEEEND?" Jiwoo says in a high pitched and playful voice, causing Hyejoo to become even redder. Sooyoung raises an eyebrow.

"No! I just want to get someone a nice gift that's all." Hyejoo says, looking away so her parents don't see her turning into a tomato.

"Who is it! Who is it come on tell me who who who who!" Jiwoo says, absolutely invading her daughter's personal space in the process. Hyejoo just swats her away.

"She's just a friend," the eighth grader chokes out unconvincingly.

"Can it be over \$20? Because if not, I'm not buying it." Sooyoung says looking down at her daughter.

"Probably. I um... I think I want to get her a necklace..." Hyejoo trails off, doing her best to not sound like she's been planning this gift since last Christmas.

"Alright, I have the perfect idea for that." Sooyoung says, beginning to walk but doesn't even get to turn around before Hyejoo is speaking again.

"I... Actually already have an idea." Hyejoo says, and Sooyoung huffs.

"Hyejoo, I'm sure my idea is better. You're just a teenager that doesn't even know anything about jewelry. Plus, I have better fashion taste. I mean look at what you're wearing." Sooyoung says seriously, not even hearing how horrible she sounds.

Hyejoo doesn't know how to argue, suddenly feeling uncomfortable in the casual wear she has on. Jiwoo glares at her wife, clearly indicating that Sooyoung crossed yet another line.

“You know what!” Jiwoo suddenly claps her hands together. “Hyejoo and I will go get her necklace, and we are going to meet you in the car!”

Sooyoung is taken aback at her sudden exclusion, but Jiwoo continues. “Go ahead Eunseo and Hyejoo, I’ll be right there.” She says.

With slight hesitation, Hyejoo and Eunseo start moving away from the married couple towards the store the eighth grader wants to purchase the gift at.

Sooyoung looks at her wife, unsure of what just happened. “Did I do something?” She asks, puppy dog eyes making an appearance.

“Stop that.” Jiwoo scolds. “You were being *so* mean to her. She’s obviously been thinking about this gift and you just made her feel bad about not only that, but herself in general.”

“I was just being honest!” Sooyoung defends immediately. “Jiwoo, she’s a child.”

“Exactly Sooyoung. She’s a child. *Our* child. So why do you talk to her like she’s an adult beneath you?” Jiwoo asks, causing Sooyoung to close her mouth.

Jiwoo takes a deep breath in frustration.

“We will meet you in the car.” The celebrity says dryly, before stepping away to join Hyejoo from across the mall floor without another word.

Sooyoung watches her family until they’re out of sight with a guilty conscience.

Then, she walks back to the Lamborghini alone.

Fallen snow crunches beneath her feet the next day.

After a restless thirteen hour flight and a million regrets running through Sooyoung’s head, it is now time for her to make her appearance at her grandmother’s funeral.

Her home country of South Korea reminds her of nothing but the sounds of screaming penetrating her small home’s walls, shattering of china from downstairs, and the buzzing of her dim ceiling light being the only thing to keep her company. But here she is, showing up - all just to prove that she is stronger than they think.

The private jet had landed just hours ago, and she hadn’t gotten much sleep on the thirteen hour flight due to obvious reasons. It didn’t help that Jiwoo was still upset with her. Exhausted, the billionaire's thick Saint Laurent shades cover the bags under her eyes.

Despite her fatigue though, her heart pounds in her chest as she approaches the entrance to the funeral home.

Fear compiles within her overwhelmingly as she begins to recognize some of the faces of those who stand by the entrance.

When Sooyoung opens the towering wooden doors to step inside, as if on cue the room begins to silence. Instead of feeling the normal surge of confidence she usually does upon turning heads, Sooyoung wants nothing more than to run away and never return.

For the first time in a long time, she feels small.

She *hates* it.

The run-down funeral home itself is even more unsettling than she'd imagined - the ceiling is low and suffocating, the wooden pews all painted white to eerily match the rest of the room. Everything is low quality; Sooyoung Ha doesn't exactly come from the most well-off family. In fact, here she stands with them, in her hometown - one of the poorest districts of South Korea.

Her grandmother's ashes sit right in front of a large framed photo of the dead woman. As Sooyoung takes in her surroundings, glares and whispers of Korean slurs register immediately as she begins walking through the crowd toward the front of the room.

Trying her best to ignore the haunting, hurtful words of her own bloodline, the CEO takes a seat at an empty pew on the left.

Sooyoung stares at the front of the room feeling purposeless and regretting COMING all this way, *especially* while hearing her relatives whisper the worst things about her in close proximity.

But she instead of defending herself, she sits with her mouth shut, suddenly reverting back to the trained animal her family raised her to be. She waits for the funeral service to commence.

That is, until she feels another woman gracefully entering the CEO's pew. Sooyoung looks up.

Her mother, lo and behold, stares down at her with indescribable disdain.

Sooyoung's throat goes dry.

"Sooyoung," her mother says, like it pains her to force out the syllables.

"Mother," Sooyoung replies, like it doesn't.

The older woman takes her seat adjacent to her daughter, and refuses to look at her, only staring forward. Sooyoung does the same.

"You embarrass me just by showing your face here." Sooyoung's mother snaps lowly in their native tongue.

Sooyoung had played this scenario out plenty of times in her own head, planned out bountiful responses - yet for some reason, her jaw is locked in place and she is unable to speak.

She told herself she would be strong enough.

Why isn't she?

A few beats of silence pass. "Where is Father," Sooyoung asks, hoping not to be blindsided by his sudden appearance.

Sooyoung's mother hums. "Your father is working hard with other duties to take care of. He *is* the man of the house, after all, and cannot just leave whenever he pleases. I wouldn't expect you to understand," her mother speaks slowly, eyes plastered to the front of the room.

Sooyoung doesn't even know whether her mother is referring to working hard, or having a man in the house, but her blood boils all the same.

“Still refusing to bring Hyejoo I see.” Her mother tuts in disapproval. “I still am yet to meet my granddaughter...”

“And you never will.” Sooyoung snaps back protectively.

“How horrible it must be for her,” the mother taps her nails rhythmically in her lap. “To grow up without a father... Only you and that braindead freak to raise her.”

White hot fire blazes through all of Sooyoung’s veins at the attack on Jiwoo. But her courage comes too little too late though, a broad Korean man around Sooyoung’s age walks into their pew and taps her mother’s shoulder gently.

“Good day, Mrs. Ha,” the mystery man says quietly, then takes her in for a seemingly sincere hug. “I am so sorry for your loss.” Sooyoung’s mother accepts the embrace graciously, causing her daughter to roll her eyes once more.

When they break apart, the man looks Sooyoung up and down, eyeing her body. She winces under his hungry gaze.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” he says, looking between Sooyoung and her mother. “I’m Michael.”

“Sooyoung, this is Michael,” her mother says, switching back to English. “Michael had been assisting your grandmother before she passed away. He is a doctor, a *surgeon* -”

“Nice to meet you,” Sooyoung responds very uninterestedly in fluent Korean.

“Likewise.” Michael returns. “Well I’d better go back to sit with my family. But again, I’m so sorry.”

The chiseled Korean surgeon walks away, and her mother turns to her the second he is out of earshot.

“Michael is a good man,” her mother hums again. “Makes good money, lives all alone,” the woman continues casually.

Sooyoung just stares forward, not caring and wishing her mother would just get out of her face. And without another word, she sits through the funeral service, missing her real family more than anything in the world.

The pain of familial exile for Sooyoung now is not one of direct whiplashes to the skin like it once was before, but a steady, slow-moving cancer that kills her life force with every passing hour.

Although her world still turns thousands of miles away, Sooyoung feels as though she has been unwillingly forced back in time, and in the process losing her sense of self that took so long to construct.

Sooyoung sits at a long reception table next to her mother, and the CEO finds herself mute once again. Utensils clink against fine china as her family chats away in their hushed tones, still yet to make conversation with the lesbian billionaire in their presence.

“No one wants her puppy, either. It’s sitting right over there,” an aunt says annoyedly in Korean, pointing to the deceased grandmother’s pet. The curly orange-haired labradoodle pup sits sadly in the corner of the room, laying on its stomach with glassy sad eyes - a newborn without a nurturing

family and home. Even for Sooyoung's cold dead heart, she feels it pang at the sight.

"The woman got it two days before dying. But of course, no one wants it. Do you know how much they cost you? We might just send it to the pound," the aunt drolls on and on, while Sooyoung zones out until-

"So what about you, Sooyoung?" One of her more relaxed uncles sitting across from her asks. "Still running your business?"

All Sooyoung can think of is how "running your business" is the worst mispronunciation she's ever heard of "leading the most successful fashion empire in the entire world."

The people around her turn their heads, waiting for her to speak. Sooyoung takes a large gulp from her cup of water. She doesn't really know what she could say in this moment that could please them (the answer is, well, nothing).

"I've... Actually been trying to stay home more, to be with my daughter and-"

She's cut off by another aunt sitting next to her mother. "A daughter? How do you have a daughter? Aren't you..." Her eyebrows raise, trying not to say the word. The atmosphere of the funeral home gets even more uncomfortable than it was before.

Her mother's head is down, as if two women having a child is the most shameful thing she has ever heard. *Like she didn't try to get into contact with our daughter a literal month ago.*

"You know," Sooyoung says right before chugging the rest of her water hastily. "I am out of water. I think I'm going to get more."

Sooyoung gets up, and makes her way over to the refreshment table, which is oddly placed right next to the urn of her grandmother's ashes. It had been bothering her that she was put so closely to the food, and apparently she was the only one who thought this way.

"You're making a bigger deal of it than it is." Her mother had stated when she had made a remark about it when they walked in, followed by another comment so far out of left field. *"You have no right to judge when your lifestyle is as disgusting as it is."*

She was starting to fill up her cup with water from a pitcher as slowly as possible when Michael approaches her from the side.

"Need any help?" Michael asks, holding his own empty cup in his hands.

"...No? It's just water." She says, glancing back at Michael like he was insane.

"Oh, I just thought, because you were pouring so cautiously." He says, clearly trying to be charming.

Sooyoung doesn't know what to say. "I like to avoid making a mess."

"Oh," Michael says with a smile. "I find that very attractive in women." He states, causing Sooyoung's face to contort.

"...Thank you for sharing?"

There is a bout of long silence between them while Sooyoung finishes pouring her water.

"Say, would you like to, perhaps, go out sometime?"

“Why would I ever want to do that.” Sooyoung rejects bluntly.

Michael is suddenly fuming, his ego clearly bruised. “You know, there’s no reason to be a bitch. Your mother said you were single and-”

Sooyoung slams the pitcher onto the table, causing the entire room to turn to look at them.

Single?

Michael jumps back, taken aback by the woman’s aggressiveness.

“No Michael, actually, I’m *not!*” Sooyoung says, a little too loudly, to only be heard by the man in front of her. “My mother said I was single because she thinks that somehow, a man of your excellent stature, will break me away from my wife.” She emphasizes the word.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know!” Michael exclaims, clearly embarrassed.

“Of course you didn’t! You’ve been taking care of an old Korean woman for the past million years!” Sooyoung says, her voice getting louder with every word. “Because if you went outside for a second, you would know that I’m actually a lesbian and that me and my wife are the richest couple on the face of this Earth!”

Sooyoung is chuckling at her accomplishment as she takes a sip from an empty cup. She then proceeds to slam it down on the table, causing the plastic to bend in the process.

“You would think that being married and having a child would stop my mom from trying to get me to change, but clearly, *clearly* that is just not the case! She would rather my child watch her parents divorce than for her to have two happy mothers.”

“You are far from happy.” Sooyoung’s mother addresses her daughter from the front of the room.

The entire family is watching them now.

“How can you possibly be happy knowing you are keeping a child from her family?”

Sooyoung scoffs. “She already has a family. And it is definitely not you.”

Sooyoung’s mother grinds her teeth, as one of her aunts decides to speak up. “Not allowing her to meet us just proves all of our assumptions that you are, in fact, a terrible mother to your child. So God forbid your mother thought a man could help straighten you out.”

Sooyoung’s fists clench at the unintentional double entendre as she turns to her relative. “You have absolutely no right to call me out, when the only thing you mother is that unibrow on your face. I will literally pay for you to get a waxing.”

Some of the kids in the room stifle a laugh as Sooyoung’s aunt self consciously covers her face.

“I’m so sick of *all* of you!” Sooyoung says, suddenly regaining her confidence. “You all think that you have some *right* to judge me just because I’m married to a woman. A BEAUTIFUL, SEXY, GORGEOUS-”

Sooyoung keeps going, even though her family looks like they’re about to vomit.

“YEAH THAT’S RIGHT! AN AMAZING, *PHENOMENAL* WOMAN . HER ASS ALONE COULD CURE CANCER. And you know what! Not even that, but before too! You were horrible people back when I was a kid, and you are all still horrible people now. *Constantly* treating me like

I was beneath you and-”

Sooyoung stops in her tracks.

“Why are you treating her like she’s beneath you?” Jiwoo’s words ring through her mind.

Sooyoung’s demeanor falters immediately, she had not only been treating her daughter poorly.

But she had been treating her daughter the same way her family had treated her.

“You know what.” Sooyoung says, regaining her thought process. “I’m leaving. But first,”

She walks over to the corner where the puppy begins to wag its tail excitedly. She picks it up.

“You are not sending another thing to be poorly taken care of you *fucking* leeches.”

Sooyoung walks past all of her shocked relatives, going past the food table again when-

Dink.

The dog’s excited little tail involuntarily hits the jar filled with Sooyoung’s grandmother onto the refreshment table, exploding all over the food, particle by particle.

Sooyoung stands, eyes wide and stunned for a moment. Her family gasps loudly, but Sooyoung regains her composure.

“I TOLD YOU ALL THAT WAS A STUPID PLACE TO PUT HER! BLAME YOURSELVES!” She yells exasperatedly, and she struts out of the room.

“YOU WILL PAY FOR THE DAMAGES SOOYOUNG!” Her mother yells after her, but Sooyoung is already halfway down the hallway leading to the door.

“TAKE IT OUT OF THE NEXT CHECK I SEND YOU THEN!” Sooyoung screams back, before letting the door slam shut behind her and walking right into the blizzard outside.

When Sooyoung finally opens the front door to her mansion in Southern California, the clock strikes 11pm.

Carrying the tiny, curly orange-haired labradoodle pup in one arm and her million-dollar purse in the other, the CEO rattles the keys as she places them in their diamond-encrusted bowl.

“Sooyoung, I know Popeye’s is your comfort food but it makes you gassy and-”

From one of the plush white couches in the darkness, Jiwoo cheers giddily at the surprise in her wife’s arms. Sooyoung leans down to gently place the animal on the floor, and watches it scurry towards the other woman on the couch.

“That’s not fried chicken?!”

“No honey, this is a puppy,” Sooyoung hums, a bit regretfully. All the dog did was lick her face too much and shit all over the private jet.

“EEEEEEEE! A puppy!” Jiwoo squeals as the pup jumps into her warm arms and begins lapping at her face and neck. “I love you so much, what’s your name?” she coos as if talking to a baby, voice

a little raspy signaling that she just woke up. “Honey, what’s his name?”

“Dog,” Sooyoung says, taking steps to sit next to her sweetheart on the couch.

“You named our dog Dog?” Jiwoo says, seemingly insulted as her wife lifts her thick fluffy blanket to slide in next to her.

“What’s wrong with Dog.” Sooyoung says plainly.

“How about you give it a real name weirdo?”

The CEO stares at the little puppy, snuggling itself in Jiwoo’s chest with bright eyes and a wagging tail despite the long day. All Sooyoung can think about is how the dog stared at her in the funeral home with no one left to love it, and how now it gets to be nurtured by love herself.

“I’ll have to think about it.” Sooyoung sighs wistfully. “What are you doing down here sweetheart? It’s late...” The taller woman brushes some hair behind Jiwoo’s ear, then rests her arm on the cushion behind Jiwoo’s head.

“I was waiting for you to come home,” Jiwoo pets the puppy soothingly. “I felt bad about letting you go without being there to see you off... And I wanted to call earlier, but I was scared your family would see your phone and give you trouble. So I just didn’t.”

“It wouldn’t have made a difference,” Sooyoung breathes, letting her head fall back on the top of the cushion to look up at the ceiling. “Nothing’s changed,” she finishes with bitterness in her voice.

Jiwoo bites her lip in the silence, unsure of whether or not to prod.

“But I... May have made a scene.”

Jiwoo’s eyes flicker in surprise. “What?”

“My mother tried to set me up with a man- oh God, I need some wine-” Sooyoung cringes hard.

“*SHE WHAT?!*” Jiwoo flares, suddenly very animated and enraged in disbelief as her wife walks toward the kitchen to pour herself a glass.

“I know,” Sooyoung calls over the sound of her wine pouring. “So I started yelling... At pretty much everyone, it’s a long story.” The slender businesswoman takes a sip as she looks into the dark hallways of her mansion, then turns back around to Jiwoo in the soft light of the living room. “And now we have a dog!”

The dog (Dog, for now) is now trotting around the living room, then bolting towards Sooyoung at the entrance of the kitchen and jumping up to be held. She looks down at the puppy in disinterest, but at the sight of it’s big black eyes begging to be picked up and loved, she obliges and takes him into her arms once again.

Jiwoo softens at the heart-swelling sight of her wife snuggling a pup in her arms. “What did they say to you?” she asks gently.

“Many things,” Sooyoung reaches over with one hand and takes another long sip of her wine. “Mostly just things like being gay makes me unfit to be a mother.”

Jiwoo opens her mouth to say something, but-

“But it’s okay.” Sooyoung finishes the wine in her glass with closed eyes, then walks back over to sit down next to her wife and look at her lovingly.

“...It just makes me appreciate what I have at home more,” Sooyoung adds softly, barely audible.

Jiwoo almost melts away. With a full heart she scoots closer to Sooyoung and rests her head on her chest. “Welcome home,” she whispers. The puppy is now resting peacefully in the CEO’s lap.

Sooyoung plays with Jiwoo’s hair gently, calmed by the warmth of her body against her own. “Maybe they’re right though.”

“About...?”

“I...” Sooyoung hesitates. It’s never been easy for her to admit she’s not the best at something. “I could be a better mother,” she says, replaying her conflict with Hyejoo at the mall the other day as she massages Jiwoo’s scalp under her perfect hair.

“Sooyoung,” Jiwoo says softly. “You aren’t unfit to be a mother,” her words vibrating against her wife’s chest. “You just need to try to be a better one.”

Sooyoung sighs heavily and Jiwoo sits up.

“But I don’t think anything could help you from being gay. I think you’re stuck with that one.” She says, her nose crinkling in amusement.

“Oh my family definitely knows that now.” Sooyoung says, a smile creeping onto her face. “When I was yelling, I kept mentioning how no one could ever get me away from my wonderful and incredibly sexy wife.” Sooyoung watches as Jiwoo’s expression turning from playfulness to lust in a matter of seconds.

“I’m going to put away the dishes.” Jiwoo stands seductively. “And then I’m going to go our playroom... If you would like to join me.”

Sooyoung smirks at the woman in front of her.

“There’s nothing I would like more.”

Before she can meet Jiwoo in the other wing of the Ha mansion, Sooyoung peers into her daughter’s bedroom a quarter to midnight.

She sees the girl snug in her covers and facing away. Judging by Hyejoo’s slow, even breathing, the eighth grader is soundly asleep.

Aside from the light spilling in from the slightly opened door and the neon lights from the inside of her homemade PC, the bedroom is pitch black.

And instead of walking away, like usual, Sooyoung takes a step inside.

The executive doesn’t even dare to turn on the lights, or cross over to the side where Hyejoo is facing. She stops just a few feet away from her daughter’s back, and ever so quietly takes a seat on the black ottoman beside the bed. Sooyoung rests her elbows on the mattress of her sleeping child.

Not knowing what to do, she begins to massage her own head in her hands out of stress.

There is a long, paper thin blanket of silence in the middle schooler's bedroom after Jiwoo finishes putting away the pots downstairs. Sooyoung looks down at the hardwood floor, and bites her lip.

"Um," she breathes very quietly. "I've been very mean to you." Saying the words for Sooyoung are like lifting massive jagged rocks, despite her singular audience member being virtually equivalent to a brick wall.

Speaking of walls, Hyejoo stares at hers in the darkness, wide awake.

"And... I-" Sooyoung stops, and Hyejoo starts to think that's probably all she's going to get. "And you don't deserve that."

Hyejoo doesn't know if she's awake anymore, or if this is just another sick dream.

"I know I don't exactly... Show it. But..." Sooyoung bites her lip again at the bedside because *Jesus, this is hard*, and why is she fighting the urge to choke up? The feeling in her realm of parenting is foreign entirely. But regardless of how laborious this entire act feels, she forces herself to continue.

"You are so important to me."

Hyejoo softens at the awkward, passionate conviction in her mother's words, and the child pulls the covers closer to her chest clandestinely.

"And I know you're asleep. I'm... I am sorry I don't have the courage to say this to your face."

Sooyoung sighs softly.

"I guess I'm just bad at this." *That's an understatement*, Hyejoo and Sooyoung both think to themselves at the same time; like mother, like daughter. A long pause follows.

And then, Sooyoung admits something that makes Hyejoo see her abrasive, rude, catastrophic mother in a new light.

"...I wish I wasn't."

"Goodnight, Hyejoo." Sooyoung whispers even quieter than her previous words, and the CEO stands up to leave. Just then, hears her wife's light footsteps approaching in the hallway.

"*Pssst!*" Jiwoo whispers loudly, after peeking in the door to see Sooyoung walking out of their daughter's bedroom and meeting her eyes. "Don't you want your early Christmas present," she whispers loudly with a flirtatious wink. "In bed," she adds with yet another dramatic wink.

Hyejoo gags silently and can't help but slowly move her pillow over her exposed ear.

"*Shit*, she's waking up," Sooyoung whispers, and leaves quickly, taking Jiwoo's hand and then gently shutting her daughter's door.

Minutes after the door shuts, Hyejoo is still staring out, unable to process what just happened. The air feels different, the atmosphere anew.

The eighth grader doesn't really know what's going on anymore.

"So what should I get Hyejoo then?" Sooyoung calls from the sunroom the next morning.

The sun had just begun sitting high in the sky for the day, and the billionaire sits in the octagonal room with a bowl of Greek yogurt and a disgusting (but healthy) green shot of wheatgrass, aloe, and turmeric. She presses her cheek on her soft palm as she watches Jiwoo meet her eyes from the kitchen.

“What do you mean?” the other billionaire chimes as she walks into the sunroom with a cup of coffee to join her wife. “You always get her the same things for Christmas, nice clothes and shoes. Stuff she needs? Isn’t that what you like giving?”

The taller woman takes another sip of her shot with a shake of her head. “No...” She narrows her eyes; something just isn’t sitting right about that. For some reason, it’s different this year. “Maybe I should get her something she... wants?”

Jiwoo looks at Sooyoung like she just began speaking in tongues, utterly perplexed. Suddenly, the bubbly celebrity grabs her wife’s face in her hands, squinting and examining her making the CEO just as confused.

“WHERE IS THE MILK!?!” Jiwoo screams.

“Jiwoo, *what?!?*” Her wife asks with squished cheeks.

“*WHERE IS THE MILK LOCATED!?!?*”

“THE FRIDGE?!?” Sooyoung takes a wild guess. (...*Where else would it be?*)

“Okay good,” Jiwoo releases her wife’s face with a sigh of relief. “I thought you were possessed or something... That was so odd of you to say.” She takes a seat in the chair right next to her wife, bare legs brushing up against hers comfortably.

Sooyoung furrows her eyebrows a little. “That I want to get our daughter something she doesn’t need?”

Jiwoo raises her own as she mumbles into her coffee. “That you’re interested in what she wants,” she meets her wife’s warm eyes, pools of dark orange in the sunlight. In them, Jiwoo sees hesitation. So she takes Sooyoung’s hand into hers lovingly. “But I’m glad you are.”

“Well I don’t... Really know... What she likes,” Sooyoung admits with an embarrassed cringe as she spoons another dollop of yogurt into her mouth. She really isn’t winning parent of the year. Or of any time period for that matter.

“Hmm... Well we can search her room for ideas!” Jiwoo smiles innocently, making Sooyoung look to her in alarm.

“Like, sneak into her room and look at her belongings? Isn’t that an invasion of privacy?”

“Pssh, no! We’re her mothers, we can do whatever we want!” Jiwoo reassures brightly.

“That doesn’t sound-”

Just then, a startled shriek comes from the top of the grand foyer. Seconds later, a disheveled Hyejoo is storming down them in her Star Wars pajamas.

“Why was *this* sitting on my chest?!?” The eighth grader demands an answer as she holds the dog, arms extended to hold him farthest away from her body like the animal has fleas.

“WHY ARE YOU HOLDING HIM LIKE THAT?!” Jiwoo cries, meeting her daughter halfway and taking the puppy into her arms to cradle him like a newborn infant.

“So no one’s gonna tell me why we suddenly have a *dog?!?*” Hyejoo looks to her mom, then her other mother for a response.

“Your mother stole him! Isn’t he cute,” Jiwoo coos at the dog with a wide smile.

“She *what?*” Hyejoo shrieks, looking at Sooyoung who is nonchalantly downing the rest of her shot. “From *who?!?*”

“It’s a long story.” Sooyoung says simply. She then looks at Hyejoo expectantly as the child is still staring at her. “...Do you need me to take you to school or something?” Sooyoung asks sharply.

Her daughter stands in silence for a few seconds looking between the dog and her other mother who is scratching its belly lovingly. She shakes her head, exasperated, and then looks back up.

“Um. No. Chaewon wanted to carpool this morning so her mom is picking me up...” Hyejoo trails off quietly, a bit flustered.

“Chaewon?” Jiwoo asks, a coy smile forming on her face. “Is there a reason you’re suddenly carpooling with her a lot more often?”

“*NO!*” Hyejoo asserts, cheeks turning bright red. “*We just like talking in the car!*”

“Well you’d better get dressed because I’m sure she will be by soon.” Sooyoung says while finishing her portion of yogurt.

Hyejoo scurries up the stairs, and Jiwoo returns to her wife’s side after letting their puppy run off and follow the child.

“WE HAVE TO SNEAK INTO HER ROOM.” Jiwoo whispers loudly across the table.

Jiwoo does a somersault, backflip, then three cartwheels, down the hallway, standing up right in front of Hyejoo’s door.

“What are you doing?” Sooyoung says, walking up to her.

“We have to be stealthy.” Jiwoo says. She’s wearing all black and has a ski mask on.

“Honey, she’s not even here.” Sooyoung says, and with a quick motion, just walks directly into Hyejoo’s room.

“You’re ruining the fun.” Jiwoo pouts, pulling off her mask, only to get a quick kiss from Sooyoung in response. She slaps her wife playfully with the fabric.

Sooyoung and Jiwoo finally look around their child’s room.

The space is dark, thanks to a special curtain the girl had asked her parents to get her. (The sun was too bright and reflected poorly on her monitor apparently) However, along the walls were various purple neon lights that illuminated the room to give it a retro feel. On those same walls were overcrowded shelves filled with various video game cases.

“Wow she is really into video game stuff. There are so many games... She’s kind of running out of

room.” Sooyoung says, looking over and entirety of the shelves, some already toppled onto the floor.

“Mhm yeah, that’s what she spends most of her allowance on.” Jiwoo says, clearly not paying attention to what Sooyoung was doing and was on an investigation of her own.

A massive computer sits in the corner of her room accompanied by a cushioned leather rolling chair. The screen is bigger than the television in her room by miles and the keyboard shines the same purple aesthetic as the lights around her.

“This computer is huge. Did I pay for this?” Sooyoung asks her wife, who is literally on the ground looking under Hyejoo’s bed.

“Hmm?” She looks up for a second and then back under the bed. “Oh no, I mean you paid for some of the parts, but she actually built that.” Jiwoo says, basically crawling under the bed now.

“She made this whole thing?” Sooyoung says, silently extremely impressed. She gets closer to examine the details. The keyboard glows in a variety of colors, the monitor bigger than most flat screens. Everything is sleek and perfectly precise, not one thing making it look like a less than professional computer.

“She could probably sell this to NASA if she wanted to honey this is so high tech-” Sooyoung looked back at her wife only to find that she was not there. “Jiwoo?”

“AHA!” Jiwoo’s voice comes from under the bed. She slowly but steadily crawls out from under it, holding a notebook in her hand. It was bright pastel pink, nothing on the cover. Very plain and elegant, as if her daughter had made sure it never touched a speck of dirt.

“What is that?” Sooyoung asks walking over to her wife.

“THE ANSWER TO ALL MY THEORIES.” She says shaking it slightly. ‘Hyejoo doesn’t like pink. But you know who does? *Chaewon!*’ Jiwoo declares proudly.

Sooyoung suddenly remembers her wife’s correction in the CVS. “The chihuahua child? The shakey one?” Sooyoung says as Jiwoo nods her head.

“YES. Why do you think her photos with Hyejoo are all over the fridge? I *know* Hyejoo likes her. But she won’t tell me that she likes her. Which is ridiculous because I literally want them to grow old together. So I have to confirm the theory myself!” Jiwoo says, immediately opening the notebook.

“Sweetie pie reading that might be a little much-”

“So you can yell at our child but looking through their private lovesick diary is where you draw the line?!” Jiwoo says, raising an eyebrow.

“Um... Yes?” Sooyoung says, but ignoring her, Jiwoo opens to the first page of their daughter’s handwriting anyway.

“From where I dwell in darkness

Who am I to ask for the sun?

You are my best friend

But I will always want more.

It's a shame that I could never let you know."

"YEEEEEEEEEEEESSSSSSSSSS!" Jiwoo screams, startling Sooyoung.

"What? That was so vague. We have no idea if that was even about Chaewon." Sooyoung states, but she will admit... Someone did have her normally emotionless daughter lovesick. It was sort of sweet.

"NO LISTEN HERE HONEY. I'VE CONNECTED THE DOTS." Jiwoo says as she moves her index fingers together. "Hyejoo told me that she messed up something with a girl a few months ago right? WELL, my little gorgeously amazing birdy, Jungeun it was Jungeun, told me that they were CANOODLING in the backseat of her car. Also 'MY BEST FRIEND'??? WHO ELSE IS HER BEST FRIEND? YEOJIN? NO. WHO IS SHE CARPOOLING WITH EVERY DAY??? That's right... Chaewon. Bam!" Jiwoo says, mic dropping the notebook onto the floor.

Sooyoung sat in awe. "Jiwoo... That actually makes complete sense...." Sooyoung says suddenly very aroused. She moves closer to her wife, her eyes hooded.

"Should we go to our room..." Sooyoung begins kissing Jiwoo's neck and Jiwoo tilts her head slightly, allowing her more freedom.

It takes everything Jiwoo has to put her hands on her wife's shoulders.

"I should put this back first!" Jiwoo picks up the pink notebook. "Our daughter is very closed off, and if she finds this anywhere out of place she will lose it and I love her but I always taught her to light the house on fire if she was ever in a predicament." Jiwoo says.

"You what?" Sooyoung asks, suddenly changing mood.

"But..." Jiwoo starts, looking Sooyoung up and down and biting her lip. "You should definitely go get the straps ready while I put it in the right place."

Sooyoung let's the sexually charged comment fill her stomach. She stands immediately and walks out of the room until she is out of sight, then giddily runs down the hallway like a hormonal teen girl.

Sooyoung loves her wife.

"WHAT DOES THAT EVEN *MEAN!*"

Jinsol comes downstairs peacefully after hearing her daughter scream in frustration for the third time in a row since she got home from school.

"Choerry? What's the problem?" Jinsol asks, looking at her very confused daughter focusing

extremely hard on an iPad in front of her. She was covered in flour, utensils completely scattered across the once completely clean kitchen.

“I’M TRYING TO MAKE CUPCAKES FOR THE BAKE SALE BUT I CAN’T FIGURE THIS OUT!” Choerry says, glaring at the screen very exasperatedly. “IT SAYS USE THE BAKING POWDER BUT WHICH ONE? THERE ARE SO MANY POWDERS...”

“....And you called me a fire hazard when I wanted to make dinner for the first time?” Jinsol walks over to her daughter and pries the iPad out of her hands, looking at the directions herself. “Let me.”

To be honest with you, Jinsol doesn’t know what any of the instructions mean. (She is many things - a scientist, a businesswoman, but *not* a baker.)

...But now is the perfect opportunity to make this a fun experience rather than a stressful one.

“Ok first... We need music.” Jinsol says, as she walked over to the side of the fridge where a small round device sat.

“Alexa, play Jinsol’s Christmas playlist on the kitchen speakers.” Jinsol says.

“Playing Jinsol’s Christmas playlist on Spotify.”

Choerry squeals with excitement, as she begins to sing over the Mariah Carey track and immediately more at ease with her mother’s company.

It doesn’t take Jinsol long to begin singing with her.

Jungeun, fresh from work, opens the front door of her family’s home to her wife and daughter screaming to Christmas music together. She might’ve joined in the deafening performance if the kitchen didn’t look like a cocaine dealer’s truck had just crashed into it.

“What is going on...?” Jungeun breathes from the threshold of her messy kitchen, the sight already making her cortisol levels rise.

Jinsol stops from her singing, but Choerry doesn’t seem to notice Jungeun’s interruption (or just doesn’t care) and continues screaming while dancing in circles around the kitchen island.

“Umm,” Jinsol says, a bit awkwardly for her age. She comes closer in her messy lounging clothes to place a sweet kiss on her wife’s cheek. “Hi honey.”

Jungeun’s voice lowers. “Why does our kitchen look like Antarctica?” And she was right, flour was dusting almost every already white surface, used supplies coated in sugary substance were strewn haphazardly on their counters.

The CEO looks behind her to take the sight in as if for the first time, her blonde ponytail swishing behind her. “Oh.”

“ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS! Is yOUUUUUUUUUuu BAAABY!

AAAHHHHAAHHHH!” Choerry runs around the kitchen clutching a wooden spoon, finishing off Mariah’s vocal arrangement as the music begins to fade out. She stops in front of her parents.

“Oh-” Choerry says, noticing the distressed look on her shorter mother’s face. “Well um, I was trying to make cookies for the bake sale after school, and then some more for poor people, but then

she came downstairs to help me but then we just started screaming and. Yes!”

Jungeun looks around. There are no cookies anywhere. She squints at the two girls in front of her. “Neither of you know what you’re doing, do you.”

“Of course we do,” Jinsol replies confidently, starkly contrasting with Choerry saying “No” at the exact same time.

Jungeun takes a deep sigh. “Okay, just let me do this-”

“NO, NO-” Jinsol and Choerry both stop her at the same time, Jinsol putting her hands on her wife’s arms as if to restrain her. “Baby please don’t worry about it, we’ll take care of it okay?” Jinsol says quietly. “I got thi-”

“HERE Mommy, you can just tell me what to do and I’ll do it,” Choerry says, screeching an elegant white high chair across the floor for Jungeun to sit in and actively participate.

Jungeun hesitantly puts her belongings beside the chair and climbs into the seat of the kitchen island. Jinsol takes the one next to her, then leans her head on her hands as she faces Jungeun.

Jungeun catches Jinsol looking at her, and she smiles back at her with a fluttering heart.

“I missed you,” Jinsol whispers with infinite tenderness in her eyes.

A bashful smile lights up Jungeun’s face. “No you didn’t,” she teases lightheartedly.

“I always do.” The CEO chuckles quietly and closes her eyes, leaning forward to kiss her wife who is leaning in too. But before she can-

Choerry inserts her face into their bubble. “Hey,” the child says with a cheeky, gleeful innocent grin. “Can we bake some cookies now?”

Her mothers pull away, moment ruined, and Jungeun clears her throat. “Alright,” Choerry awaits directions like a bird itching to fly. “Get the mixer.”

Choerry scrambles behind the kitchen island on a stool to open one of the kitchen cabinets, and pulls out a blender.

“No Choerry, the mixer! That is a blender!” Jungeun corrects.

“...Um...” Choerry says nervously, then points to the toaster, suddenly losing her ability to distinguish household appliances due to the sudden nervousness triggered by being unpreparedly put on the spot.

“Yerim, does that look like a mixer to you?”

“Hey, hey,” Jinsol gets out of her seat and stands behind Jungeun’s chair, wrapping her arms around her wife to ease her agitation. “Just explain it to her sweetie, don’t yell it makes her nervous,” the blonde says gently in her wife’s ear.

“I’m not yelling-”

“Shhh,” Jinsol silences, kissing Jungeun’s cheek. “Be nice,” she whispers.

Jungeun looks back at Choerry with a sigh, who is still not able to find the mixer. “Choerry, the mixer is the red one at the back.” The eighth grader, relieved, carefully pulls it out and sets it on

the countertop. “Yes, perfect. Okay. Now get $\frac{3}{4}$ a cup of the sugar. The sugar is the one that tastes sweet.”

“I know what sugar is mommy I’m not that dumb,” Choerry responds a bit sassily over the Christmas music as she scampers around for a measuring cup.

“Okay I was just saying, because you seem to have gotten everything else all over the kitchen.” Jungeun counters irritably, but Jinsol plants kisses on her neck, easing her back to calmness.

For the next few hours or so, the three of them follow this cycle - Jungeun giving instructions, Choerry following in front of her, and Jinsol alternating between helping Choerry and calming her wife whenever she got a little too tightly wound with their child.

When Jinsol finally pulls the last of the cookies out of the oven so their daughter doesn’t burn herself, Choerry cheers excitedly and even Jungeun herself is impressed at the appetizing array of cookies and their uniformity.

“Thank you mommy,” Choerry runs over sheepishly to envelop Jungeun in a tight, loving hug. “We couldn’t have done this without you,” she adds, practically smothering herself into her seated mother’s side. Jungeun’s heart melts as she pulls her daughter closer with a smile.

“*We did it!*” Choerry screeches, running into Jinsol’s arms behind the kitchen counter, as if years and years of being disconnected ceased to exist. Jinsol, heart full with a feeling she had almost forgotten, fights the tears prickling at her eyes as she hugs her laughing daughter.

“It was all you,” Jinsol reassures as she takes in the small girl’s warmth. She wouldn’t want to be on a team with anyone else. And as Jungeun watches their daughter hug Jinsol, old Christmas music playing softly in the background, it makes her heart feel as though it was sparkling. It may have been a messy night, but her family was better than anything she could ever ask for.

“Okay, it’s late you two.” Jungeun says. “Now go get ready for bed. You’ll have to frost these tomorrow when they cool.”

“Okay.” Choerry says, running away from the mess she’s made to go to her room.

Jinsol looks at Jungeun slightly confused. “We didn’t even make frosting.”

Jungeun sighs. “I know. I’m going to make it.” She says putting her hair up and walking to the counter to pull out a small amount of ingredients. Jinsol pads over and grabs her wrist gently.

“Nooo, you’re not lifting a finger. I’ll do it.” She says bumping Jungeun softly out of the way. “I watched you give Choerry directions. I think I have the hang of all baked goods now.”

Jungeun surrenders, mainly because she kind of wanted to see what Jinsol was going to do.

Slowly but surely, Jinsol measures and adds the correct amount of ingredients needed to make the frosting. Jungeun is watching with her chin rested on Jinsol’s shoulder, making sure to be there in case anything goes wrong.

And soon enough...

“Voila!” Jinsol says as she finished mixing the green frosting in the bowl.

“I’m very impressed.” Jungeun says, smiling while nuzzling her face into Jinsol’s neck.

“Taste it just to be sure.” Jinsol put some frosting on a spoon and held it up for Jungeun.

Before Jungeun could get to the spoon however, Jinsol moves it towards her own mouth, slapping a little bit of the frosting onto her lips.

“You’re ridiculous.” Jungeun says, but she was blushing, giggling as she moved forward to kiss the frosting off of her wife.

“Was it good?” Jinsol asks as Jungeun pulls away. Her wife rolls her eyes, but could not deny the everlasting butterflies in her stomach.

“Amazing.” She says, “Now clean this up?”

Jinsol looks around the messy kitchen and then back at her wife, who was still dressed in her business clothes.

“Of course.” Jinsol said. “You go get ready for bed now okay.”

Jungeun kisses her once more. “Okay.” She says as she slowly detaches herself from Jinsol and makes her way up the stairs.

It takes Jinsol a while to pick up the mess in the kitchen, but she doesn’t mind. Because she knows that her wife is getting the rest she deserves, and that’s all the motivation Jinsol needs.

Choerry walks down the stairs the next morning and sees Jinsol already sitting at the counter, coffee in hand.

“Good morning,” Jinsol says to her daughter as she sits down across from her. “There’s some eggs and bacon on the stove if you want!”

“Mmmm.” Choerry rubs her eyes as she slides off the chair and grabs a plate. When she sits back down she munches for a while, she watches her mom start to prepare the frosting in a bag to decorate the cupcakes.

“I’ll get started while you eat, and then you can join me when you’re done.” The CEO says as she starts putting frosting on cupcakes.

Choerry eventually puts her plate in the sink, and walks over to help her mom. But first...

“Alexa play Jinsol’s Christmas playlist.” Choerry says and Jinsol looks up and smiles.

Playing Jinsol’s Christmas playlist on Spotify.

A fun upbeat Christmas song begins playing quietly and both girls ice cupcakes, humming along to the songs as they go.

Choerry helps Jinsol and vice versa as they both attempt to make various patterns on their cupcakes. They’re both very bad, but neither one of them care - they’re just enjoying each other’s company.

Choerry stops suddenly in the middle of frosting a cupcake and looks up at her mother.

“Hey mom? Can I ask you a question?”

Jinsol's eyebrows raise as she looks back at her daughter. "What's up?"

Choerry hesitates and looks down, fiddling with her hands a little bit.

Jinsol tilts her head. "Go ahead baby what is it?"

Choerry sighs slightly and looks back up. "Um," Confrontation is hard, especially for the student body president. "Why... Have you been taking me...to school lately and doing all this breakfast stuff? Not that I don't like it but. Like why?"

It was Jinsol's turn to hesitate. She couldn't exactly admit to her own daughter that she'd finally opened her stupid eyes to see how badly she was neglecting her family, and that it took her wife being extremely upset with her to realize it.

"Choerry, I... I just saw that I wasn't helping around as much as I could."

Choerry looks up at her with empathetic eyes.

"...And Mommy... wasn't feeling... Very well." Jinsol finishes awkwardly, but quickly understands her poor choice of words when she sees Choerry starting to panic.

"What was wrong with her? Was she sick? *Is* she sick?" Choerry asks quickly, starting to pull her arms closer to her body.

Jinsol reaches out calmly. "No! No nothing like that sweetie, I'm sorry, that was bad wording."

"Oh... What do you mean then?" Choerry asks, steadying her breathing from her rise of panic.

"I just mean..." Jinsol bites her lip. "She was getting overwhelmed with having to go to work every night, coming home late, then having to waking up early. She did a lot of things by herself. For a long time."

Choerry nods understandingly; she's noticed too.

"I didn't want her to have to do them by herself anymore. I should've never let her do things by herself." Jinsol says nobly. "So I took time off so Mommy wouldn't be overwhelmed anymore."

Choerry slowly nods more and more, understanding the weight of it all. Although she stares with a pensive expression, it truly makes her *happy*, hearing the reasons as to why Jinsol is suddenly very active after so many years of barely interacting with her.

"Aren't you busy though...? You... Did this all so Mommy could rest?" Choerry asks incredulously.

"She deserves it, don't you think?" Jinsol responds without a doubt in her mind, looking at their daughter with a loving smile.

It absolutely warms Choerry's heart. Her mother loves her wife so much that she would drop anything to help her feel better. Choerry always had admired their love, but even more so today.

"Plus, I get to hangout with you again." Jinsol briefly addresses the touchy subject of their once close friendship, then sends another apologetic yet loving smile to her daughter as she squeezes the piping bag in her hands.

Choerry can't help but get a little nostalgic as she turns around to wash her hands at the sink, hiding teary eyes.

“Yeah.”

It's Sunday December 22nd, the day of the annual St. Jihyo's Candy Cane Lane bake sale, and Ms. Vivi Wong is driving her red hot convertible through Hollywood. Her phone continues to supply directions to Haseul's house as her hair blows through the morning air.

Vivi's daughter Chaewon sits in the passenger seat with a giant black Balenciaga hoodie (that Vivi has no idea how she acquired being that the sweater must have been at least \$700), big black sunglasses, tousled hair, and an upset frown that Vivi catches when she looks at her at the red light.

“Are you gonna tell me what's wrong?”

“Mom why don't you go fuck yourself,” the normally soft-spoken little child snaps ruthlessly, making Vivi's eyes almost pop out of their sockets.

“Excuse me?!”

Chaewon doesn't answer, still staring at the traffic in front of them with an even greater frown.

“What is the matter with you!”

Suddenly, Chaewon's bottom lip is quivering and then she's bursting into sobs in the passenger seat. Vivi is even more confused.

“What is the matter?!” Her mother repeats, bewildered.

“*N-Nic...*” Chaewon can't even finish the word because she's started wailing dramatically, making Vivi sigh deeply as she rolls the Corvette through the city.

“What?”

“*NICKI!*” Chaewon screams ferally.

There is a long pause as the gears turn in Vivi's brain. “...Minaj?!”

“Oh my G-God don't even say her name,” Chaewon is breaking down sobbing into her hands.

“Did... Did she... Overdose or something?” Vivi asks softly with a very concerned expression, eyes still on the road. She knows how much her daughter likes Nicki Minaj; she'd insisted to get a tattoo of the rapper's name for weeks, then when her mother refused she stole money out of Nate's wallet to buy a tattoo machine to do it herself. Unfortunately, her mother had caught her before that could happen.

“**WORSE!**” Chaewon screeches. “***SHE TWEETED THAT SHE'S RETIRING?!?!?***” The tiny eighth grader is now screaming in pain. “**HOW COULD SHE LEAVE US?? AND WITH WHAT? *CARDI!***” Other people in traffic stare at the top-down vehicle in alarm. “**I DON'T WANNA TALK ABOUT IT ANYMORE! *FUCK YOU ONIKA!***”

“...Didn't that happen like... last week?” Vivi asks gently; her daughter has been crying over this same thing for days now.

“**OH, SO NOW I DON'T GET TO GRIEVE?**” Chaewon fires back through tears.

“...Okay...” Vivi continues to drive the car, unsure of what to say at all as they enter suburbia.

(Vivi doesn't really *get* Chaewon, and Chaewon doesn't really *get* her mother either. But Vivi never lets that stop her from trying.) “...I'm really sorry about that sweetie.”

Chaewon is curling into Hyejoo's hoodie, refusing to say another word on the matter.

“...At least you're going to see Yeojin, and then your other friends later tonight?” Vivi offers gently.

The eighth grader huffs. “I guess,” she says weakly with teary eyes and a sniffle. The news was broken to her this morning right when she woke up, sending her into a debilitating cocoon of horror. But her mother has a point - she gets to see Hyejoo today!

And her other friends, right. Of course.

Chaewon is thankful she's going to Yeojin's, too. She's finally going to get to see where her and Principal Haseul live, and see for herself if the house is as jank her fellow rap god says. But as she looks around through the oversized sunglasses, she furrows her brows a little because that doesn't seem to be the case.

The neighborhood they are entering has vibrant, adorable houses with perfect lawns and completely clean surroundings. Nothing about the area screams anything remotely low class - if anything, for SoCal, Chaewon can tell to live in such a nice house in a peaceful area, you'd either have to be a drug dealer or at least upper middle class.

And the GPS says they're only two minutes away from Principal Haseul's house. *Yejin doesn't live in the hood! Fake ass bitch!*

It instructs Vivi to make a left, and she does, driving her car down a straight road lined with softly multicolored houses to a cul de sac. She's driving her car around the bend - and then, she sees it.

“Oh my God is that Principal Haseul?” Chaewon stares.

Haseul, *oh my God that's Haseul*, on this lovely morning on the Lord's day is in her front lawn wearing nothing but a dark sports bra and shorts, both of which are hugging her body in all the right places. The woman is pushing around a lawnmower as sprinklers go off around her.

All the blood in Vivi's body involuntarily rushes to her face, as she finds herself staring at the other woman mouth agape. Vivi never knew Haseul's arms were so... *strong* ... and her toned arms glisten with sweat as they push the sizeable lawnmower under the bright morning sun.

Haseul hears the familiar hum of the car and turns, and Vivi sees it in slow motion. Her straight black hair swishes as she tucks some behind her ear, and the sight instantly makes an army of butterflies flutter through Vivi's stomach. Then, Haseul breaks out into her big lovable dorky smile.

She shuts the lawnmower off as Vivi somehow comes back down to earth and manages to park her car alongside the curb.

“Hi Chaewon!” Haseul greets the little child first, who climbs out of the convertible with tear-stained cheeks in all black. “...Is everything okay?” she asks sympathetically.

“No,” Chaewon replies softly, and Vivi squints at her child in offense as she walks toward them because that's a whole lot kinder than the response she got. “Nicki Minaj is retiring from the rap

game.”

“What!?” Haseul responds, appearing to be very affected by the news as well. “Oh no! For real?”

“Yeah,” Chaewon breathes out painfully.

“Drat!” Haseul tuts and looks up to the sky in dismay. “What am I supposed to listen to now? Cardi B?”

“THAT’S WHAT I SAID-” Chaewon is interrupted by a shot of water suddenly wetting her cheek making her wince and raise her hands.

“Hey.” Yeojin growls lowly from the threshold of the adorable sky blue home with a large water gun. She then drops another water gun on the porch for Chaewon, then flees back into the home. Chaewon runs to the front door to get her revenge.

Vivi has to exert a great deal of effort to tear her eyes away from Haseul’s shining toned arms.

“Hey,” Haseul laughs softly, suddenly seeming a bit shy. “You came! That’s what she said.”

Vivi is now losing herself in Haseul’s loving, bright eyes. “Of course I did,” she smiles, and the art teacher is starting to really feel her heart race.

“I want to hug you but… I’m sweaty, haha,” Haseul says sheepishly, oblivious to the fact that Vivi sinfully wants nothing more right now than to feel her. “Welcome to da crib,” the principal says awkwardly, throwing up a peace sign.

“Sorry I’m not MTV,” Vivi responds with a childlike smile and scrunching her nose.

“Oh that’s okay, I’d rather have you.” Haseul realizes what she just said, and looks back at Vivi trying to conceal her panic only to see the teacher is just beaming even more. “UM,” Haseul wants to swiftly change the subject. “I call it the Feminest.”

“You call your house the Feminest.” Vivi deadpans.

“Yeah, isn’t it awesome? I came up with it slicing watermelon during the 2016 election. Come on, let’s go inside.”

Haseul leads her to the entrance of her house.

“It’s not much but I think it does the job…” Haseul says somewhat nervously as they begin walking through the home. The sun shines brightly through white curtains, light wooden floors creaking slightly as they walked through. Pictures of Yeojin and Haseul during their lives’ milestones covered the walls, all of which made Vivi feel warm inside.

“It’s a lovely house Haseul.” Vivi says, a tiny smile on her face. “These pictures are so cute.” Vivi looks at a picture of a very young Yeojin sitting on her mother’s shoulders as Haseul struggles to fit them both in the frame.

Haseul blushes and smiles back. “Thanks! I wish she was that small again sometimes you know?” *More like all the time*, Haseul muses, reminiscing about a time before Yeojin knew how to blast her own rap music through her speakers at 3AM.

They move into the bright kitchen, classic wooden cupboards contrasting well with the modern kitchen appliances. A small island sits in the middle, a few stools scattered around it. On top is various baking ingredients and supplies, well organized and ready to be put to use.

“Do you want anything to drink?” Haseul asks, walking towards the fridge.

“Water is fine!” Vivi says, settling down on one of the stools. She sees Yeojin and Chaewon in the backyard through the kitchen window, giggling and blasting each other with their water guns. Vivi can’t help but feel at ease.

Haseul grabs a glass and fills it with water from the fridge. She brings it over to Vivi, who is suddenly very aware of Haseul’s exposed skin once again. Haseul doesn’t seem to notice, but instead wipes her brow.

“I’m a little Dirty by Christina Aguilera! I’m going to go take a shower and then we can start baking! I tried my best to lay everything out here for the cookies except I left the butter in the fridge so it wouldn’t melt. Make yourself comfortable! I’ll be right back!”

“Okay.” Vivi nods and Haseul makes her way out of the kitchen. Vivi looks around at the comfortable little home and takes it in. She’s not sure what it is, but something about the place just makes her feel so cozy, like the house was her own. In fact, it made her feel slightly more at home than her actual house.

Vivi shakes her head and the thoughts from her head to focus on the ingredients in front of her. Haseul said something about butter, so she decides to get a head start to ease the process before the woman comes back. She walks over to the fridge and opens it only to find...

“Do you see what I put up with?” Yeojin says, coming into the house as Chaewon follows close behind. “Mrs. Wong, I’m so sorry that my mother is insane. Why we need that much cheese? I’ll never know.”

Vivi is indeed looking a cheese filled fridge, but it only causes her to chuckle. Yeojin and Chaewon walk to the living room, only separated from the kitchen by a small wall.

Vivi looks around the slices for butter but comes up empty handed.

“Yeojin do you have any butter?”

Yeojin, who was setting up her gaming console, looks over at her teacher and hesitates. “Um no... I used the rest of it to... try and make a slip and slide down the hallway.”

“Wait why the hell wasn’t I invited to that?” Chaewon asks.

“It was a self care exercise. You wouldn’t understand.” Yeojin says, turning her head back to the screen.

Vivi giggles and then closes the fridge. “It sounds like it was a lot of fun Yeojin.”

“Thanks mom.”

The energy in the room shifts suddenly, Vivi and Yeojin both looking at each other awkwardly. Chaewon is trying not to laugh, even though her dark hoodie is making her face barely visible.

“Did you just call me mom?” Vivi teases.

“N-no... I was calling for... my mom! Where is she? Haha!” Yeojin says nervously.

“Your mom’s in the shower.” Vivi smirks.

“Yes! That’s right I just didn’t want to startle you haha MOM!” Yeojin screams at the top of her

lungs.

The shower can be heard turning off, and Haseul sprints out, soap bubbles covering her hair and a towel wrapped around her body. Water trails behind her and she nearly takes herself out by slipping on the floors.

“WHAT?” Haseul asks, worried.

“Um. Love you!” Yeojin says giving her mom a hug.

Haseul looks at Vivi who is trying to contain her laughter, but just shrugs.

“Oh. Okay. I love you too, but couldn’t you have waited until I was dry?” Haseul asks confused.

“Nope!” Yeojin says.

Haseul removes her daughter from herself. “Okay well. I’m going to finish...this.” Haseul points at her soapy hair and then heads back to the shower.

“I’m going to go to the store to get some butter then, will you guys be ok?” Vivi asks. Yeojin nods her head aggressively before returning swiftly to the living room.

“That was embarrassing.” Chaewon states, a smile seen under her very large hoodie.

“Shut up.” Yeojin says, sinking further and further into the couch as Vivi picks up her keys and heads out the door.

“Hello?”

Haseul has a towel on her head as she walks around, not seeing any sign of the art teacher in the kitchen.

“DAMN YOU SUCK!” Chaewon screams aggressively from another room.

“NAH THIS IS.” Haseul hears Yeojin try to catch her breath. “RIGGED. I AM HITTING EVERY FUCKING MOVE.”

The woman rolls her eyes and follows the sound of her daughter, moving with a newfound curiosity.

Haseul walks through the house as music from the TV grows louder. She finally gets to the source by walking directly into the living room. She stops mid stride when she sees Yeojin and Chaewon dancing as if their rent was due the next day.

“STARSHIPS. WERE MEANT TO FLYYYYYYYYYYYY” Chaewon screams, panting and waving her arms around her frequently. A single tear rolls down her face at the line, but Haseul closes her eyes and nods, understanding her pain.

“I’M GOING TO KILL MYSELF.” Yeojin shrieks, moving her arms all over the place only to achieve various ‘GOOD!’s on her point tally.

“Hey have you guys seen-” Haseul starts but is interrupted by a very passionate Chaewon.

“You gotta FEEL IT.” Chaewon yells as they pull their final pose.

Chaewon wins first place and Yeojin is second, but only because they were the only two playing.

“I would like to dedicate this ‘W’ to Nicki...may she rest in peace...” Chaewon says with a hand over her heart.

“She’s not dead moron.” Yeojin says, catching her breath.

“Can I play?” Haseul says, startling the two girls who were clearly way too invested to notice the woman watching them play.

“Be my guest, I would love to see this disaster.” Yeojin says, gesturing to the space she had been previously been playing in.

Haseul takes her stance next to Chaewon, waving her arms around in order to get the console to recognize her form. She scrolls through the songs until she finds her selection.

“Principal Haseul, I don’t think you’re ready for this.” Chaewon takes a deep breath, as if preparing herself for a performance. She takes off her sweatshirt and stretches her arms.

“I’ll see about that!” Haseul says, pulling the towel off her head and flinging it to the side. After cracking her back, the screen dims and a deep electronic guitar begins playing in a tropical tone through the speakers.

It’s Pump It, by the Black Eyed Peas.

HUH. HUH. HAAAAAAAAAAAAA. PUMP IT!

Haseul and Chaewon start moving to the beat, both perfectly in sync with the animation on the screen.

“What the fuck!” Yeojin says, but her mother is too focused on the dance moves to be concerned with her daughter’s language.

THIS JOINT IS FIZZLIN’, IT’S SIZZLIN’ RIIIIIIIGHT.

Haseul is effortlessly hitting every single move. Chaewon herself is breaking a sweat, but there’s a giant smile plastered on her face as she looks over at her principal busting a move.

“I can’t tell if I want to snap my neck or hype you up.” Yeojin says conflicted.

She makes up her mind when she seems to be the only one to notice Vivi returning with the groceries in the corner of her eye.

“YESSSSSSSS LET’S GO MOM!” She whoops.

Fergie’s verse starts and Haseul goes harder than she was before, if that was even possible.

LET THOSE SPEAKERS BLOW YOUR MIIIND, AND LET IT GO LET IT GO HERE WE GO.

Haseul twirls her hips in a slow motion and Vivi watches her every move.

“BRING IT A-ROUND TOOOOOWWN!” Yeojin hollers, causing Vivi to cover her mouth to stop from laughing.

The song finally ends, and Haseul high fives a sweating Chaewon. Vivi notices the genuine smile

on her daughter's face and can't help but feel warm seeing how well the two got along.

"That was great!" Vivi says, finally speaking up from outside of the room.

Chaewon looks over at her mom, and seeing the bag of groceries, she quickly grabs her hoodie and sprints to get the bag, Yeojin right on her tail.

Haseul is left staring at the woman in shock, her hair still slightly damp and her face the color of a tomato.

"H-How much of that did you see?" She asks hesitantly.

" *This joint is fizzlinnn...* " Vivi smiles, executing a part of Haseul's dance routine.

"Oh god." The other woman covers her eyes, completely embarrassed.

"No, hey, that was great. The best Just Dance performance I've ever seen." Vivi says, pulling Haseul's hands away from her face.

They're left staring at each other for a beat too long before Vivi moves away.

"We should probably go help with the baking."

Haseul shakes her head slightly, her breath nearly getting caught in her throat.

"Yeah!" Haseul croaks out, nervously moving around Vivi and heading back to the kitchen.

"What's up Yeojin Mafia--"

"And Gowonators!"

"Welcome to *Let's Get BAKED!*"

The two eighth graders were positioned at the granite countertop with Yeojin's iPhone propped up to film their Instagram livestream. It was only proper, she had said, considering that she had over 100,000 new followers since her upload of *Milf Smackdown*; the traction was definitely there.

Yejin's personal Instagram account @tupacs_daughter, although linked to the alias Lil Peni\$, lacked any real photos of the child. The entire post feed was just pictures of rappers praying and poorly drawn self album art, so this live was really her face reveal to her large following.

Nevertheless, Yeojin is wearing a white Jabbawockeez mask. Chaewon dons a gorilla head. The camera is angled in a way where you can barely see the ingredients in front of them, and the girls look even shorter than they already are. Hundreds and thousands of views trickle into the livestream.

"Hey everyone so today we will be making POT BROWNIES," Yeojin explains loudly, chest puffing up at the idea of having illegal substances in her possession at such a young age.

"WHAT?" Haseul screams off screen. She leans over to Vivi "You got a recipe for that?"

"No!" Vivi responds, raising an eyebrow at her daughter, who just shakes her head "no" as to let them know Yeojin was not being serious.

“Here’s the kush,” the child holds up a Ziploc bag of dried oregano into the camera. She pops it open and brings it closer to give her audience a better look. “It is very fragrant… Go Won can I get a vibe check?”

“Good vibes,” the blonde says in her tiny feminine voice under the massive gorilla mask.

Yejin squints to read the new comments, and involuntarily reads one out loud. “*Wtf is thissss Y’all just kids,*” the eighth grader snorts. “That’s not what your mom said last night,”

Chaewon and Yeojin cackle senselessly into the camera. Yeojin reads the next comment aloud.

@lilpeenenthusiast: “*where are the milfs*”

“Me every day,” the principal’s daughter dismisses without skipping a beat or answering the question at all.

@yeriana: “*yalls channel smells like hot garbage*”

“YERI GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!”

Suddenly, Yeojin sees her mother materialize behind her in the screen. “Sweetie please watch your language or turn it off,” Haseul says calmly.

@down4lil: “*MILF*”

@milfnation: “*BARK BARK BARK*”

“The first thing to do in situations of mental illness is to ask for help,” Yeojin says, shaking her head at the comments. “Let’s begin!”

Chaewon slams her hand down onto the mini soundboard that she had retrieved from the trunk of Vivi’s car before they started filming. It makes the sound of a machine gun being shot 1000 times.

“Jesus Chaewon, is that really necessary?” Vivi asks looking at her daughter.

“I’M IN A STATE OF GRIEF. THIS IS MY ART LEAVE ME ALONE.” Chaewon responds and hits another button, signalling the sound of several explosions to play out.

Vivi rolls her eyes at her daughter as Haseul brings over a mixer. She scans the ingredients in front of them and then picks up a piece of paper with the recipe on it.

“Here you can do this part, and I can do this. Those kids are not going to get anything done.” Haseul says, pointing at specific parts of the recipe.

Vivi smiles. “Sounds good.”

The two women begin working as the kids continue their very loud and obnoxious livestream behind them. However, after a time, the kids can barely be heard by the women who are working so well together. Vivi does one thing and Haseul does another, complementing each other well. Time passes as the women make occasional jokes and conversation without missing a beat.

Soon enough, even Yeojin and Chaewon have grown tired, predictably making a single batch of oregano brownies before retiring to the living room. Haseul and Vivi continue moving throughout the kitchen like clockwork to finish the baked goods.

Haseul notices Vivi from the corner of her eye. She always notices her, but something about Vivi being in her house and making cookies with her seems more and more like a dream. Vivi looks up and catches Haseul looking at her, making the principal jump. Haseul drops some flour onto Vivi in the process.

“Oh gosh I’m so sorry!” Haseul says, putting the flour down and trying to wipe the flour off with her hands.

Vivi watches her chuckling and grabs some of the flour in her hand, throwing a little on Haseul instead.

“There, now we’re even.” Vivi says, Haseul looking at her now white clothes. She smirks taking a handful in her hand.

“But what if I wanted to win?” Haseul says playfully, throwing another handful of flour at Vivi. Vivi gasps exaggeratedly and starts grabbing more flour to throw back.

Haseul tries to get another handful but Vivi grabs the bag, hiding it behind her back. Haseul attempts to grab the bag, wrapping her arms around the other woman, both of them giggling like crazy.

The giggling stops once they realize how close their faces are.

Haseul and Vivi are breathing heavily from laughter, looking into each other’s eyes. Haseul’s stomach drops when Vivi doesn’t show any sign of moving away. They remain close, both women standing in silence.

“Hey mom?”

The women break apart immediately upon hearing Chaewon’s voice. The girl comes into the kitchen holding her mother’s phone.

“Nate’s calling.” Chaewon gags holding out the phone.

“Oh okay!” Vivi says, quickly walking over to Chaewon. “I’ll be right back.” She says looking over at Haseul.

“Okay.” Haseul gives her a thumbs up, her heart falling to the floor.

“Damn you guys are messy. It reminds me of Nicki’s personality... Oh my god I can’t do this.” Chaewon says.

The small girl is almost in tears as she walks back into the living room, leaving Haseul in the flour covered kitchen alone.

The Has exit the comfort of their tinted windowed Mercedes Benz and are met with the glimmers of thousands of Christmas lights lining the neighborhood in front of them. Candy Cane Lane - one of the most popular tourist attractions of the South Bay during the Christmas season - was located in a peaceful hillside suburb a short drive away from the beach.

Sooyoung and Jiwoo are scheduled to participate in their shifts at the annual St. Jihyo’s bake sale, and Hyejoo has come to tag along. The three of them are all clad in expensive, stylish coats to keep warm as the Winter chill envelops the scene.

“Honey can you please come get the cookies! Hyejoo you too!” Jiwoo chimes from the other side of the car. “I have the hot chocolate! Which by the way was such a good idea baby,” she affectionately pokes the cheek of Sooyoung, who is now at her side ready to help her wife.

Sooyoung gives her a guilty smile. The only reason the CEO suggested bringing containers of hot chocolate was because she was hoping to mess with a cup for Jinsol, but Jiwoo didn’t need to know that.

Carrying all their contributions through the crisp air, they walk a small ways from their parking space to the unofficial entrance of the event. They recognize many parents from the school PTA, as well as Irene, who taps away at her MacBook on a side table on an accountability spreadsheet. That is, until she spots the Has coming her way, to which she purses her lips in preemptive irritation.

“Irene!” Jiwoo giggles excitedly, waddling over to the professional woman as she carries the giant containers of Starbucks hot chocolate at her sides.

“Jiwoo! Hello.” Irene says courteously, a bit stressed but giving her a smile. Which fades as she meets the eyes of the other parent at the celebrity’s side. “Sooyoung,” Irene acknowledges dryly, with a signature hint of distaste.

“Irene... Always a pleasure,” Sooyoung jokes in her airy yet very deliberate manner, the fashion queen’s honeyed voice failing to charm the PTA president. Sooyoung sets the cookies down on their stand right by Irene’s side, while Jiwoo helps to arrange the newly added goods in a presentable manner.

“Alright,” Irene mumbles, scrolling through another spreadsheet on her MacBook. “You two will be paired with another group of parents tonight and that would be-” Irene’s eyes widen at the problematic pairing. “Oh for goodness sake,” Irene tries to edit the particular sheet but Haseul has disabled her from doing so in addition to making half the spreadsheet in Wingdings font requiring Irene to copy and paste every contaminated piece of information into a third party decoder. But that’s nothing compared to the fact that the Ha’s just happen to be paired with none other than...

“*JUNGIEEE!*” Jiwoo is screaming like a five-year old seeing her best friend exit the Tesla, as the Jinsol and Choerry organize to retrieve some baked goods from the vehicle. Before Jungeun can pick up their cookie container, Jiwoo is suddenly jumping on her for a spontaneous Koala hug.

“This school is a fever dream,” Irene breathes out into the night.

Hyejoo, face shining from the white light of her phone screen, is the only one who hears, and looks up understandably. “A borderline nightmare really...”

“Who even paired them together!?” Irene huffs frustratedly in the glow of her laptop and the Christmas lights.

“ME!”

The Has, Kims, and Irene all turn to see Principal Haseul approaching them with both of her mittened hands on a covered tin of fresh brownies. Ms. Wong is right behind her, carrying similar baked goods to which Irene subtly yet knowingly raises an eyebrow. Yeojin follows behind them, more trays held steady. Chaewon, on the other hand, is wearing her borrowed black Balenciaga hoodie and giant sunglasses despite the sky being pitch black; despite the fun of baking “pot” brownies, her anguish towards Nicki Minaj had returned.

If she was being honest, Hyejoo did not understand the love her crush had for Nicki Minaj. Nevertheless, she was worried at the depressed look plastered on the little blonde's face. Leaving her space adjacent to Irene's central table, the raven-haired eighth grader makes her way to her crush.

"Hey-" Hyejoo starts, only for Chaewon's hand to immediately cover her face.

"We grieving," the blonde says softly, as if speaking pains her.

Hyejoo's eyebrows furrow in deep concern. "Still? I thought you texted that you could find the strength eventually?"

"I did, but it got worse..." Chaewon explains, still covering her face for no reason. "I was scrolling through my feed to check for any updates on the situation only to see that Nicki is m-... She's marr-..." She can't even finish the sentence.

"Oh that's right, she got married, I saw that on the way here," Hyejoo responds, referring to the odd, questionable Twitter announcement. "That sucks. I can't believe she would do all of this to you on Christmas," she says monotonously, but the sincerity is there.

"IT *HURTS!*" Chaewon shrieks animalistically, and is suddenly throwing herself into Hyejoo's chest.

"Um- I, um-" Hyejoo's eyes are nearly bulging out of their sockets as she feels Chaewon's sunglasses press into her chest. Her arms instinctively wrap around her, as she not-so-awkwardly rubs her back. "It's okay..." she says with a tomato red face illuminated by the countless Christmas lights.

Hyejoo looks up from Chaewon to see Jiwoo in the distance with her jaw agape in the biggest smile she has ever seen on a human face. Her daughter immediately looks away in embarrassment.

"Hey," she calls, prompting Chaewon to lift her head and their eyes to meet. Hyejoo's heart skips its 17th beat of the night, and it hasn't even been five minutes. "Maybe the lights can take your mind off it, and we can go look at them together?"

Chaewon doesn't respond immediately, instilling panic in the taller girl's mind. "*I mean it doesn't just have to be* us, like," Hyejoo says abnormally fast. "Like we can make everyone go, like not everyone obviously because you know the parents have to stay and sell the cookies. The... The cookies-"

"Yes let's go!" Chaewon answers, eyes filled with Christmas wonder and excitement. "Everyone else is boring anyway," the eighth grader smiles wide and turns around, tugging the sleeve of her best friend and leading her off to immerse themselves in the heart of the tourist attraction.

The last thing Hyejoo catches before running along is her mother still looking at her, Jiwoo's wide-eyed smile growing impossibly larger by the minute.

"We'll be back!" Chaewon shouts to her own mother, who is helping organize their contributions with Haseul and Irene.

"Be safe!" Vivi shouts back. "Stay together!"

Chaewon responds by tugging Hyejoo's arm right to her chest and resting her head on the taller girl as they walk into the illuminated neighborhood.

“Alright well,” Irene rubs her temples. “It says here that the Has and the Kims will be running the joint tables on the corner of the lane over there,” she tells both of the couples, who are now in front of her (Jinsol and Sooyoung seconds away from getting into a hissy fit, their wives standing in between them).

“UNLESS,” Irene continues, “Someone would like to SWITCH WITH THEM,” the PTA president says right at Haseul who has a mouthful of stolen cookies. Irene shoots an expectant look at Haseul, but Haseul just makes the same look right back, as if they were playing a game.

“NO SWITCHIES I WANT TO BE ON THIS TEAM!” Jiwoo shouts, despite everyone in the conversation being less than a foot away from her.

“Hopeless,” Irene grumbles under her breath at Haseul, then looks back at the rich women in front of her. “Okay fine. Principal Haseul and Ms. Wong you two can be on the opposite side of the street, over there-” Irene gestures to the open table farthest away from her. “Has and Kims you will be over on that corner over there at the two tables. And *please*, ” Irene looks directly at Jiwoo and Jungeun. “I will *not* have another fight break out.”

“Don’t worry Irene!” Jiwoo chimes. “Sooyoungie’s gonna behave, aren’t you honey?” Sooyoung makes one last predatory face at Jinsol before bothering to nod. “That’s what she tells me in the bedroom-”

“OKAY!” Jungeun interrupts, for good reason. “We’re gonna get our stuff and head over now!” She squeezes Jinsol’s hand lovingly before picking up a platter of baked goods and a money box.

Irene sighs as both couples finally leave her alone. She turns back around to her table to collect herself.

“Hey!” a familiar voice, her favorite one, brings her out of her thoughts. Seulgi is walking towards her with a very comfortable black coat on and a large coffee in her hand for her wife.

“Hi,” Irene breathes out, happy to her for the first time all day. (She had told her wife to take their daughter out, because she could not have Yeri running around screaming in the kitchen today.) A soft smile blooms on Irene’s normally ever-stressed face. “I missed you,” she says shyly.

“Awwwe,” Seulgi’s eyes twinkle in the light as she places the coffee down. “I missed you too baby,” she says sweetly, resting her hand on top of Irene’s on the table.

“Where’s Yeri?” Irene asks, her stress soothed.

That is, until Yeri peeps her head out slowly from behind Seulgi’s coat. Her blonde head.

She’s blonde.

Irene chokes hard on her coffee.

“Hi...” Yeri whispers, clearly terrified of the reaction she knew her stricter mother would elicit from the sight of her dyeing her hair on a whim.

“WOAHHHH HEY HANNAH MONTANA CAN I GET YOUR AUTOGRAPH??” Yeojin screams, running forward through the wet grass to check out her friend’s new hair, an excited Choerry at her side.

Irene stands completely silent, twitching as she looks at her newly blonde daughter. Seulgi offers a very, very, nervous smile. “Haha! We, uh-”

“What the *hell* did you let her do?!” Irene hisses.

Seulgi taps her pointer fingers together like a five year old. “Well. She said you were okay with it. But then I realized you probably weren’t. But then I had already paid the hair lady for her to do it. So I didn’t know what you’d be more mad at - spending money and getting nothing or Yeri going blonde, so I made an educated guess...” Seulgi trails off, trying to figure out Irene’s thoughts on the matter. Her wife just continued to stare blankly, clenching the clipboard so tight that her knuckles turned white.

“I’m going to take a nap.” Irene says calmly, handing the clipboard to Haseul and walking away rigidly. Seulgi follows awkwardly, trying to talk Irene down from exploding.

Meanwhile, the Has and Kims are finishing setting up the two tables.

“This is going to be so much FUN!” Jiwoo exclaims. Her wife offers her a supportive smile, but looks at Jinsol in disgust. “Oh I know! Why don’t we use this time to learn more about each other!” The celebrity clasps her hands together in excitement. “I’ll sit with JINSOL!” she practically screams. “Sooyoung you sit with Jungeun! Even though you already know so much about her!”

Jinsol immediately looks at her wife in terror, but Jiwoo is already pulling a chair up to join Jinsol at the first table.

Jinsol swears she can see Sooyoung smirking as she takes her place. And it takes everything in the other CEO to not reach over and strangle her.

Jinsol is ready for a reenactment of field day if she’s being completely honest.

The entire shift of them selling cookies has just been her smiling and pretending to listen to Jiwoo’s outrageous stories, while actually listening to her wife and her mortal enemy’s conversations.

Sooyoung had been making avid conversation with Jungeun the entire time. Of course she never even got close to flirting, she would never do that to Jiwoo in a million years, but she did know it was driving Jinsol insane just to be talking to her. So Sooyoung made it a point to constantly keep the conversation going.

“Hey Jungeun, have you ever heard this one?” Sooyoung begins a joke and delivers it perfectly, causing Jungeun to burst out into fits. Jinsol never thought her wife’s laugh would cause her to cringe until that moment.

“What’s four times zero?”

Jinsol snaps out of her thoughts to face the ever ecstatic Jiwoo who has just asked her that question.

“...What?”

“What’s four times zero?” Jiwoo asks again, an eyebrow rising inquisitively.

“Zero.” Jinsol responds plainly.

“Okay but,” Jiwoo challenges, “If you’ve got four zeroes, you still have four of them...”

Jinsol’s brain feels as though the gears have stopped turning and she’s sitting completely

dumbfounded at this new information.

“Wait a minute-”

“AHHHAHAHAHAHA!”

Jinsol looks over to see Jungeun laughing at another poor joke Sooyoung had just made. It probably wasn't even that good, and yet her wife was cackling like a maniac.

The shift was almost over, when Jungeun says she's craving a cup of hot chocolate. Sooyoung smiles, seeing the perfect opportunity for her prank.

“Oh I'll get you one don't worry.” Sooyoung says. She turns to her wife. “Do you want one baby?”

“Yessss!” Jiwoo says, and then turns to Jinsol. “OH! Jinsol you should have one too!” She looks back and Sooyoung. “Get her one too!”

“For sure!” Sooyoung says a little too enthusiastically for Jinsol's liking. She shifts uncomfortably as Sooyoung walks back to pour drinks.

“She said that really weird...” Jinsol remarks.

“She's been in the Christmas spirit lately!” Jiwoo says, but looks back at her wife pouring the drinks. Jinsol's right, it was a little too perky of her to get Jinsol a drink voluntarily... something was definitely off.

“I'm going to go help her though!” Jiwoo said standing up and walking over to her wife.

Jiwoo was there just in time to see Sooyoung drop a small white tablet into one of the cups.

“What are you doing?!” Jiwoo says suddenly from behind her, making the fashion CEO jump and nearly spill the hot cup.

“Jesus Jiwoo!” Sooyoung says in a whisper, trying her best not to look like she was just caught red handed. “Um, nothing...”

“What'd you put in there?” Jiwoo asks, an eyebrow raising.

“What? Nothing,” she says coolly, but can't fight the guilt that shines through her tone of voice.

“Okay! So this is perfectly fine for me to drink.” Before Sooyoung can even react, Jiwoo takes the contaminated cup and chugs the entirety of the scalding hot chocolate completely.

“*NOOOOOOOO JIWOO NO!*” Sooyoung screams very dramatically, causing Jinsol to look back at them as well as a few families walking by.

“Is everything okay back there?” Jinsol calls over in mild concern.

“Yeah everything's fine Greta Thunberg mind your business.” Sooyoung says, turning back to her wife, dragging her off to the side eyes wide. “*Why did you drink that?!?*” Sooyoung says, panicked.

“Why what was in it? POISON?” Jiwoo says a little too loudly. “I TOLD you to throw your cyanide away!”

“What? No!” Sooyoung says, eyebrows furrowing in stress and fingers raising to massage them. “I put a fucking laxative in there,” she mumbles through her hands. “A *lot*. Like enough to lose fifteen pounds.”

“GOOD!” Jiwoo says confidently. “Now the air wafting into our bedroom tonight will match your shitty attitude!”

Jiwoo downs the remnants of hot chocolate and even taps the bottom of the cup so that the remaining dissolved laxative would fall into her mouth. Then, she walks back over to the table with the two clean cups and hands them to Jungeun and Jinsol.

Sooyoung groans and walks back over to the station. She sits back down next to Jungeun and Jiwoo.

“Hey Jungie, do you want to go check out the lights? I need a break from this craziness!” Jiwoo says, eye contact with Sooyoung for trying to slip a laxative to her friend’s wife.

“Jiwoo, do you think that’s really a good idea...? They would still have to be at the booth for like fifteen minutes...” Jungeun prods, unsure at what leaving the two women alone for that long would mean for the safety of everyone in the entire neighborhood.

“No go it’s ok. You guys have fun!” Jinsol says, reassuring her wife, standing up to kiss her softly.

“Umm...” Jungeun says, but before she can object any further, Jiwoo links their arms together and pulls her towards the glittering Christmas lights.

Once they are out of eyesight, Jinsol spares no time in throwing a cookie at Sooyoung’s head.

“OW WHAT THE-” Sooyoung tries to get out, but is continuing to be pelted with cookies. “STOP! This jacket was made in Wakanda!”

Jinsol pauses. “Wakanda?”

“Yes. Jiwoo says that is where the best materials come from and you know, being me, I am obviously going to be wearing only the best material.”

Jinsol starts chuckling, causing the other CEO’s demeanor to falter. “WAKANDA isn’t a real PLACE you IDIOT!”

“Yes it is Jiwoo told me she saw it in a documentary.” Sooyoung says confidently. “The Panther.”

“*BLACK PANTHER?*” Jinsol is in hysterics now.

Sooyoung, extremely insulted and confused, starts reaching for some of her own cookies and throws them back at Jinsol, causing her to cease her laughter.

“YOU’RE SO FUCKING OBNOXIOUS!” Jinsol whisper-screams, flinging cookies at Sooyoung.

Sooyoung is about to retaliate, arm high in the air holding a cupcake she’s about to slam down like the hand of God, when a cough escapes a tiny mouth in front of the booth.

“Um. Can we buy a cupcake or?” Hyejoo asks the women who are fighting *yet again*, Chaewon staring at them next to her.

“...You don’t have to pay for it.” Sooyoung says embarrassedly, offering her daughter the cupcake. “It’s on me.”

“Okay...” Hyejoo says cautiously, taking the cupcake and handing it to Chaewon. “Where’s mom?”

“Um she went to go look at the lights with Auntie Jungeun,” Sooyoung responds. “I don’t know how much longer she’s going to last if I’m being honest,” she adds quietly.

“Why wouldn’t she last?” Hyejoo asks, a little concerned.

“She... She’s going to have... Um. Bathroom issues?” Sooyoung says more as a question rather than a statement.

Honestly Hyejoo is just too afraid to even ask at this point.

“Okay... Well Principal Haseul said it was okay for us to leave if we wanted. I was over there for a while hanging out with everyone.”

“Oh okay yeah great.” Sooyoung stands up. “Let’s go find your mother then... Jinsol.” Sooyoung says, eyes glaring as she passes in front of the blonde to walk along the path. Hyejoo says goodbye to Chaewon as she follows her mother.

Chaewon is left behind awkwardly standing next to Jinsol. The older woman tries a smile only to be reciprocated with a very judging look.

“Doesn’t your scalp like, hurt?”

Jinsol is taken aback by the little girl’s comment. “What?”

“It’s just so blonde... Aren’t you scared it’s going to fall out?”

Jinsol’s eyebrows crinkle together.

“Wh- you’re blonde too why are you asking me this?”

“Yeah but yours is lookin’ a little fried Mrs. Kim.” with that, Chaewon flips her hair over her shoulder and struts away.

Meanwhile Hyejoo is still trailing behind her mother.

“So do I want to know why you looked like you were about to slam that cupcake on Mrs. Kim’s head?” Hyejoo asks.

“No, probably not.” Sooyoung says as her and Hyejoo walk into the distance, trying to find Jiwoo. “But I’m ready to go home.”

Twinkling of all colors illuminate the neighborhood as Principal Haseul and Ms. Wong walk the empty street of Candy Cane Lane together. The attraction had officially begun to close; cars foreign to residents had long since left.

With hands stuffed in her coat pockets for warmth, Haseul’s face is absolutely radiant under the Christmas lights. Vivi catches a subtle glimpse as they consume the neighborhood together, adoring the light pink flush on the other woman’s cheeks from the cold, not even able to tear her eyes away.

Vivi is caught, though, when Haseul turns to look at her but catches her already staring. They both

stop in their tracks.

“Wait, is there something on my face?” Haseul asks casually, hands moving to her cheeks as a guise for the fact that they are getting ten times redder.

“No, no,” Vivi breathes, white vapor escaping from the cold. Her eyes dart across Haseul’s face in awe one time, two times, centimeters back and forth as if taking it all in for permanent memory. “You’re just pretty,” she finishes, even softer.

Haseul stands, frozen, wondering how that’s possible when she feels so overwhelmingly warm inside. Not really knowing how to respond, she instead musters up the courage to link her own arm with Vivi’s as they continue through the neighborhood.

Vivi fights the unfamiliar impulse to rest her head on Haseul’s shoulder.

“Any plans for winter break?” Haseul asks, looking over at her.

The art teacher has an unreadable expression. “Nate is taking us on a trip to Cancun,” she says, trying to sound enthusiastic, but failing miserably.

Haseul scoffs a little with a smile. “You don’t seem too excited,” she dares to press.

“No, no I am, I’m just sleepy,” Vivi defends herself dryly. “I always sound like this,” she supplements, directly contradicting her first excuse.

Haseul knows neither of them are true. But she says nothing as they continue walking in silence, Vivi comfortably clinging onto the principal’s arm.

“It’s just,” Vivi starts, feeling the urge to explain herself in the silence. “He does a lot for us.”

A long pause, a few more crunches on the artificial snow.

“It’s a lot that... That we don’t need. But I’m thankful, of course,” the teacher says, as if choosing her words very carefully.

A few more steps together in silence. “...But?” Haseul asks gently, knowing that there’s more to hear that is going unsaid.

Vivi sighs. “But...” She tucks some loose strands of burnt orange hair behind her ear gracefully. “Sometimes-” she stops, seemingly struggling to verbalize. “Sometimes I just feel like I want something more than that.”

It’s the most revealing thing Vivi has ever said about her relationship, and Haseul’s heart races in her chest with hope. “More than Cancun?” She plays dumb, just to get more out of her.

“More than... Money.” Vivi’s eyes look melancholy, staring out into the empty street, looking out into the world in front of her for something she can’t quite place. “The feeling that money can’t buy.”

Haseul somehow gathers the courage to ask, “And he doesn’t make you feel that way?”

“No, no no that’s not what I meant,” Vivi backtracks, refusing to put that stamp on her relationship even if it may be true. “I...”

Haseul still stares at her with concern and loving eyes.

“I’m saying too much,” Vivi laughs nervously, shaking her head. “And I shouldn’t be complaining.”

The principal notes that not once did Vivi say that she loves him.

They walk peacefully in the silence, a million thoughts running through Haseul’s head. She feels Vivi shiver against her arm. “It’s *so* cold,” she whispers.

Haseul stops in the middle of the street and unlinks their arms, both of them shining from the flashing of the golden white LEDs.

“Here,” Haseul says, removing her red scarf from around her neck selflessly.

“Oh no, Haseul, what about you?” Vivi asks, but Haseul is already carefully draping the warm fleece around the teacher’s head.

The principal just shakes it off, with a casual “I didn’t need it anyway.”

The two of them are mere centimeters apart, yet again, and Vivi holds her breath at the sight of someone so beautiful so close.

Haseul finishes with the scarf, but can’t seem to let go for some reason.

Their eyes meet, and the seconds feel like an eternity.

Vivi’s eyes twinkle, her cheeks just peeking out over the red scarf, and Haseul can tell she’s starting to smile. It makes her sad, thinking that some part inside of Vivi is unhappy.

“Now come on,” Haseul smiles. “Let’s make sure our kids haven’t killed each other,” the principal says, linking arms with Vivi once again.

And maybe it’s the eggnog, but something about Haseul saying ‘our kids’ makes Vivi’s heart bloom.

“WHAT’S UP FUCKERS.” Yeojin says walking into the Kim household.

“Yeojin. Welcome.” Jinsol greets the girl that just walked through her front door with a glare.

“Oh sh... shoot! Haha shoot I’m so sorry Dr. Kim I thought, this was just a children’s event...” Yeojin says awkwardly scratching the back of her neck, present in hand. Jinsol could barely see the wrapping paper around it because of the extreme amount of tape layered on top of it.

Jungeun Kim walks towards her wife and the tiny eighth grader. “Yeojin! So glad you’re here! The girls are all waiting for you upstairs in the east lounge room.” She says.

Yeojin dabs, not knowing what else to do in the moment, and then awkwardly side steps past the couple.

“Alright I’ll just...” She turns slowly and then quickly sprints up the stairs.

Jungeun turns to her wife with a big smile. “Isn’t she funny!”

Jinsol is still squinting, as if she can still see the younger girl. “She’s a little bit out of it if you ask me...”

“So are you, what’s your point?” Jungeun says playfully, making Jinsol pout. Jungeun rolls her eyes. “Oh come on you big baby. Let’s go watch Catfish.”

Jinsol smiles, looking at her in admiration. “I told you it was good.”

“Shut up.” Jungeun says, but she drags Jinsol into the living room to binge some more of their new favorite series.

“Thank god the elf is here we can finally start.”

Yeri receives a harsh push from Yeojin as the tinier girl walks into the lounge room.

“I will walk right back out of this establishment.” Yeojin threatens.

“Walk back downstairs after that awkward ass conversation you just had with Choerry’s moms?” Hyejoo asks, causing all the other girls to giggle.

“Y... You heard that?” Yeojin asks, covering her eyes with her hand to avoid looking at her friends.

“Come on I want to see what I got!” Choerry says pulling Yeojin to the floor.

All the girls sit comfortably on top of a big fuzzy rug in the middle of the east lounge room. The Christmas tree placed in the corner of the room sets the perfect mood for the kids to enjoy their holiday fun. The coffee table next to them has left over cupcakes from the bake sale and a pitcher of milk is ready for the girls to dig into.

“Okay who’s going first let’s get this show on the road.” Yeojin asks.

Chaewon raises her hand immediately, waving really aggressively as if there was anyone else with their hand up.

“Okay someone give Chaewon her gift already Jesus.” Yeojin says.

Yeri presents a giant box to Chaewon and the smaller of the two squeals with joy. She unwraps the box recklessly and pulls off the lid. In her hands she’s holding a giant megaphone. She looks at Yeri quizzically.

“You gotta SPEAK UP girl. Sometimes you talk and I think I hear my dead dog whispering to me. Fucking freaks me out.” Yeri says, but Chaewon pays no attention, turning the megaphone.

“THANKS YERI.” Chaewon screams into the bullhorn. Yeojin covers her ears in distaste.

“Damn it Yeri she’s never going to stop using that shit she already has a soundboard.”

Chaewon crawls from her comfortable place next to Hyejoo to put the megaphone in Yeojin’s face.

“DEAL WITH IT.” She blasts through the megaphone at frightening volume.

“Alright, Yeri’s next.” Hyejoo says, pulling on Chaewon to get her to sit back down.

Yeojin chucks her tape wrapped gift in Yeri’s general direction, missing by a few feet. Yeri rolls her eyes and crawls over to pick it up.

“How am I even supposed to open this.” Yeri says, struggling with all her might to open the present.

“Bite it with your teeth don’t be a coward.” Yeojin responds.

Hesitantly Yeri does it and rips the wrapping open. She tears at the paper, until a bottle falls out. Yeri reads the label and then looks up at Yeojin.

“You got me... Hair treatment?” She asks.

“Yeah, because after bleaching your hair I don’t want you to go bald!” Yeojin says, receiving wrapping paper to the face. “I CARE ABOUT YOUR HEALTH!”

“Okay where’s Yeojin’s present?” Chaewon asks.

Choerry puts a little box, wrapped phenomenally, in front of the girl.

“Wowww pullin’ out all the stops with this one huh? You sure a robot didn’t wrap this?” Yeojin says, carefully unwrapping the box as not to ruin the hard work.

“Ugh hurry up!” Yeri teases and Yeojin puts a hand up.

“THIS IS A DELICATE PROCEDURE. I’M DOING SURGERY ON A BOX.” She states loudly.

Finally Yeojin takes the box out and opens it. Inside is a little handcrafted orange bracelet with white and black beads that reads **YEOJIN**.

“It’s a friendship bracelet! I have one too!” Choerry says, lifting her wrist to reveal a purple one matching Yeojin’s, except her beads say **CHOERRY**. Yeojin inspects the bracelet closely.

“I don’t know I’ve never been much of a bracelet wearer...” Yeojin trails off.

“Oh!” Choerry says, smiling nervously. “Well I just wanted you to have it, you don’t have to wear it-”

“BACK OFF. CHAE HELP ME PUT THIS ON.” Yeojin turns and Chaewon does as she’s asked.

“Me next right?” Choerry asks and her friends nod. Hyejoo hesitates before softly offering her friend a roughly wrapped present.

Choerry’s eyes shine and she takes the gift, unwrapping it carefully even though Hyejoo’s decorating skills were less than subpar. She pulls out a small pink plush lion.

“LION!!! From Steven Universe!!” Choerry hugs the little toy with all her might.

“You watch Steven?” Yeojin asks from across the circle.

“Of course!” Choerry looks back at Hyejoo. “Thank you! This is one of the best gifts I’ve gotten for Christmas so far!”

“Have you gotten other gifts?” Chaewon asks suspiciously.

“YES! I FORGOT TO TELL YOU GUYS.” Choerry says excitedly, pulling out her phone. “Chad gave me this before we went on break! Isn’t it romantic!”

Choerry shows the girls the back of her phone case, where there’s a polaroid jammed inside of

Chad smiling. His eyes are closed as if he was blinded by the light of the flash and the words “luv u merry xmas bb” was written on the bottom sloppily in permanent marker.

Yeri and Yeojin looked at each other. “So romantic.” They said in unison.

“Well there’s still something else. I think?” Hyejoo questions, squinting to try and see her other gift.

Choerry shakes the wrapping paper lightly and a little piece of paper falls out. The pink haired girl holds it up to read.

COUPON FOR ONE HUG.

Choerry smiles so wide, Hyejoo is scared that she’s going to break her jaw.

“THANK YOU SO MUCH!!!” Choerry immediately jumps from her seat and tackles Hyejoo.

“This counts.” Hyejoo mumbles from under the girl even though she’s smiling from her good gift giving.

“I figured.” Choerry says, handing over the coupon.

“Okay one more person. And of course Chae got her.” Yeojin says smirking, obviously teasing the two girls.

“**SHUT UP.**” Chaewon blares through her megaphone, sending Yeojin backwards.

Chaewon puts her megaphone away and suddenly changes her demeanor, any signs of teasing completely erased. She pulls a little box out from behind her and hands it to Hyejoo.

Hyejoo takes the box, trying her best not to blush. She opens it carefully and nearly gasps at what’s inside.

Settled neatly on a padded display was a gorgeous silver necklace in the shape of a small wolf. Hyejoo ran her fingers over it delicately, getting close to look at the detail.

“Wh- how??” Hyejoo questions, as she stares at the gift in awe.

“I saved up all my allowances.” Chaewon say shyly.

“THE LIMIT WAS LITERALLY \$20.” Yeojin says, ruining the sweet moment between the girls. She sighs when Hyejoo looks at her in dismay. “Well Hyejoo you might as well give Chaewon the gift we all know you got her AGAINST THE RULES.”

Hyejoo makes a face on the edge of denial, but lets her shoulders slump in defeat. She pulls out a similar box to the one that she had received, and hands it to Chaewon. The smaller girl takes it and opens the box quickly.

“No way...” She says, marvelling at the contents of the box. Inside is a nearly identical necklace, only the small charm is that of a butterfly. Hyejoo smiles warmly as Chaewon looks at it.

“It’s like we’re soulmates or something. HAHA.” Hyejoo laughs loudly, trying to awkwardly cover up the intense words that she had just realized she had said.

“Thank you... I love it.” Chaewon says, snuggling into Hyejoo as the taller girl’s face goes red.

“Are you guys done making out? Because I’m about to dive into those cupcakes...” Yeri says, and Chaewon and Hyejoo split apart, still unable to contain their blushing.

“YES BITCHES, LET’S DEVOUR THIS.” Yeojin says, as she grabs the first cupcake and the other girls follow.

The gang talk for hours until they have to go home, giggling and enjoying each others company before disappearing for the holidays.

The door to Jungeun and Jinsol’s master bedroom bursts open dramatically at 12:00AM on the dot.

“*MOMMIES!*” Their daughter’s ever-energetic voice rips through the quiet, peaceful ambiance the two wives had created in their oversized bedroom. Jungeun and Jinsol, once sprawled out on their respective sides of their big white bed, are now started awake by their screaming child. “*MERRY CHRISTMAS!*”

“*MY CALCULATOR-*” Jungeun shouts half awake, re-entering the world just at the climax of her night terror. Jinsol, tucking messy blonde hair behind her ear and also half-awake, rubs her eyes and scoots over to comfort her wife.

“The calculator dream again?” Jinsol asks softly, as if Choerry didn’t just break the sound barrier. The CEO brushes some hair away from her beloved wife’s face.

“It never stops breaking,” Jungeun responds seriously, eyes barely open as she rests her head on Jinsol’s shoulder. Both women look up at their daughter at the foot of their bed, who is desperately trying to keep herself from laughing.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to scare you!” Choerry whispers loudly, visible due to the hallway light coming in through the doorway. “*MERRY CHRISTMAS!*” she squeals again, then dramatically throws herself onto her mothers’ bed to give them a hug.

Before they can even properly respond to Choerry cuddling into their warm bodies, the eighth grader is off the bed and dragging sizable presents towards her parents.

Jungeun, still nestling herself in Jinsol’s chest in response to the cold midnight air, smiles sleepily. “So excited for Christmas I see,” she comments playfully, truly not even bothered to be awoken because of the endearing display.

Jinsol had always let Choerry open her normal presents at midnight ever since she was a toddler, leaving her presents from Santa for the next morning. Even a few years back when Choerry cried upon finding out Santa truly was not real, Jinsol made sure to still leave her extra presents to open in the morning to keep her customary joy alive.

Jungeun had always protested, saying Jinsol spoiled her too much, but she was no match for her two very stubborn girls. Plus, if Jungeun was being honest, she loved watching Jinsol spoil their daughter any time of the year.

“Well go ahead baby, open them!” Jinsol encourages quietly as Choerry giggles in front of them, on their bed once again.

“Wait,” the eighth grader whispers, then pulls out a homemade purple card from behind her back. She extends it out to her moms. “You two first.”

The two women look at their daughter, stunned and speechless (as if Choerry doesn't always do this for them, even when it's not a holiday).

"You... Wrote us a card?" Jinsol says with tears suddenly pooling in her eyes, trying to stop her voice from cracking.

"...Yes...?" Choerry confirms as her head tilts in confusion at both of her mothers' sudden waterworks. "You guys are so bare minimu-"

Jinsol covers her mouth to stifle a sob as if she'd just seen the most beautiful work of art on the planet when Jungeun opens the card to reveal Choerry's very poor but very effortful (bless her heart) drawing of a family picture on one side of the purple cardstock. And on the other:

Merry Christmas Mommies. I'm so grateful to have you as my family. I would never ask for anyone better. I love you so so so so SOSOSOSOSO so so SO so SO-

(Choerry continues, taking up the rest of the space on the page.)

SO much. I love you ♥

- Choerry

Jungeun immediately bursts into tears, followed closely by Jinsol doing the same. "T-That, was so BEAUTIFUL-" Jinsol chokes out in happiness.

"...You guys didn't even get your present yet?" Choerry asks quizzically, while Jungeun gasps dramatically.

"THAT WASN'T THE PRESENT?" The CFO says through sobs. Jinsol pulls her wife closer out of comfort, even though she's just as much of a sappy mess.

"No! This is," Choerry pulls out a perfectly wrapped rectangular present to give to her moms.

When Jungeun and Jinsol finally finish removing the wrapping, they lift the product from the box with the utmost care. "Oh wow..." Jinsol says quietly as she watches Jungeun run her hands over the object inside.

Sitting in the box is a glimmering metal rectangular frame shining with stars that light up bright white. A screen is placed in the center and a small switch on the side.

"I made it myself with extra parts from Halloween. Finding the pictures took the longest time though, I spent hours on your Facebook profiles. You have to turn it on..." Choerry says, voice trembling a little out of sudden anxiousness despite her parents being the most nurturing pair in the world.

Jungeun moves the switch to turn the homemade device on.

The screen comes to life, displaying a picture of the three of them together from nearly nine whole years ago, sitting on the beach of their home. After a few seconds the picture smoothly transitions to a picture Jinsol had taken long ago, one of Jungeun holding Choerry's hand as they walk down the sidewalk after picking Choerry up from her first day of Kindergarten. The emotions overwhelm Jinsol at this point, and she can no longer see the pictures in front of her from the tears clouding her vision. More recent pictures move across the screen, most of them Choerry and Jungeun except for the few that were taken within the past couple of months of the girl and Jinsol on the way to school.

It switches again to a picture of Jinsol cradling baby Choerry in her arms, looking down at her as though she is the most precious thing on the planet.

Jungeun has already begun sobbing again, and now Jinsol is also in hysterics.

“W-Why are you guys crying so much?” Choerry asks, fighting the urge to cry too watching her mothers break down in front of her.

“We love you so much,” Jinsol whispers lovingly as she lunges forward to pull Choerry into her and her wife’s arms.

“I love. You. Too.” Choerry struggles out, being muffled by both of their tight, loving embraces. “Can’t. Breathe.”

“Oh sorry sweetie,” Jungeun chokes out, laughing blissfully as they both loosen their grip. “This is amazing, thank you.” She says, kissing her daughter’s forehead.

“Okay... So, can it be my turn now?” Choerry says, looking at the pile of presents like a hungry lion.

“Of course!” Jinsol says, rubbing her eyes.

Choerry squeals, reaching for the first present and unwrapping it quickly and carefully.

Jinsol brings Jungeun into her arms, wiping the tears from her mess of a wife. Both women watch as their daughter opens present after present.

Jinsol takes in her beautiful family and she wishes she could just stay right here in this moment, forever and ever.

It’s quite a while before sunrise when Sooyoung sneaks out of bed on Christmas morning.

The Has had lounged around all day on Christmas Eve, a perfectly comfortable precursor to the biggest holiday of the year. Even after the debacle with Jinsol, her family seemed to not let it affect their Christmas spirit.

Sooyoung was glad. She had something special planned for her family, and if her stupid prank on Jinsol had ruined it, she would have been peeved. (If that she meant she’d be upset at Jinsol rather than herself, well, that was nobody else’s business.)

The tall CEO quietly walks down the stairs of her house, careful not to make a sound. She tiptoes past the living room, the magical soft glow of multicolored Christmas tree lights highlighting her face as she moves throughout her mansion.

Once Sooyoung gets to garage door, she clicks the light switch carefully, as if Jiwoo or their daughter would somehow be able to hear her from this far. In front of her is a plethora of neatly wrapped gifts, all bundled together inside of a huge clear plastic bag.

The richest business executive in the world had purchased a few extra surprise gifts for her family this year. She had figured they needed it. With Jiwoo out of the loop and Sooyoung not knowing a thing about wrapping, she had sent them to be wrapped in secret. Eunseo would deliver them to the garage when Sooyoung let her know the family was asleep.

Sooyoung grabs the bag with all of her strength and throws it over her shoulder, moving as quietly as she can go back to the main tree by their grand foyer.

As Sooyoung begins to unpack the gifts, she shivers a bit from the cold morning air and completely regrets not grabbing her robe. She scans the room for a blanket, but remembers they were taken across the house for laundry earlier this evening.

Sighing, she looks around to find any source of warmth, and her eyes land on a Santa hat Jiwoo had been happily sporting around all day. Sooyoung smiles at the thought of her sweet wife, and gladly takes the hat and places it on her own head.

She continues gently placing the presents under the tree, too focused to see her daughter curiously spying on her from the top of the stairs.

Hyejoo stops halfway, watching her mother put gifts under the tree at four in the morning. For a moment, she thinks she's dreaming. All she wanted was a glass of water, but instead she was witnessing the live version of the Grinch after his heart grew two sizes.

She watches as Sooyoung places boxes under the tree delicately. Hyejoo squints to see her name on a majority of the gifts being handled by her mother, and her eyebrows raise.

Hyejoo creeps back up the stairs, and back into her room. She grabs a project she had thrown away after seeing her mom fight with Dr. Kim. Hyejoo looks at the small object and places it inside a box by her desk, wrapping it cleanly.

Her mom wasn't the only one who could plan a Christmas gift surprise.

“ANOTHER CAR!”

Jiwoo wraps her arms around her wife as she opens her last box of her mountain of presents. It's the keys to a Monster Truck.

“Thank you sweetie pie!” Jiwoo plants a sweet kiss on Sooyoung's lips, then gasps in excitement. “I'M GONNA RUN OVER ALL MY OTHER CARS-”

“NO!” Hyejoo panics, fearing the day Jiwoo picks her up from school in a monster truck. She herself is sitting in front of her own opened mountain of gifts, waiting for the rest of her family to finish their turns.

“Alright it's your turn!” Jiwoo smiles widely, handing Sooyoung a giant box. “Well the one you can open in public anyway.” She says winking.

Sooyoung giggles like a little school girl as she recklessly unwraps the gift. Once she basically rips the cardboard apart, she pulls out a giant onesie, accompanied by a mug.

“IT'S A GRUMPY CAT COLLECTION!” Jiwoo basically screeches with joy as Sooyoung looks over the gifts, an unreadable expression on her face. “Get it? Because you're grumpy, but still lovable!!” Jiwoo says, her hands clasped together in amusement.

Hyejoo watches on edge, slightly afraid of what Sooyoung's reaction was going to be. Within a few seconds she had her answer.

Sooyoung looked enamored with the onesie, immediately putting it on. She admired the mug,

looking at every detail.

“I love this.” Sooyoung says firmly, inspecting the rest of the cup, and Jiwoo grins widely.

“Seriously?” Hyejoo questions and both of her mothers look at her. She backtracks. “Not in a bad way just I didn’t think you’d like that.”

“It came from my family. Of course I like it.” Sooyoung says matter-of-factly. Hyejoo just nods. *Good to know.* She thinks to herself.

“Well I guess that’s the last present.”

Jiwoo and Sooyoung look at each other knowingly.

“ACTUALLY!” Jiwoo says, grabbing Hyejoo’s hands. “We have one more gift for you!”

“Wha-”

Hyejoo can’t even get a word out as Jiwoo drags the young girl up the stairs, Sooyoung not far behind. They keep walking until they get to one of the vacant rooms near Hyejoo’s side of the hallway.

Jiwoo covers her daughter’s eyes, as they come to a stop. Pulling out a key, Sooyoung walks around the girls and unlocks the door.

Jiwoo guides Hyejoo a few steps inward before pulling her hands back away from her face.

“SURPRISE!!!” Jiwoo squeals.

Hyejoo opens her eyes, and quite frankly she doesn’t know what to say.

The room’s walls are a dark shade of grey, darker than her own room even. The walls are lined with neon lights, looking as if each panel of the room was its own circuit board. Multiple comfortable black leather recliners sat in front of a gigantic plasma screen TV. Connected to the television was various game consoles, as well as a computer for whatever Hyejoo wanted to use it for.

3 shelves of brand new games were placed on the only empty space next to the television. An entire section behind the recliners was dedicated to double mini fridges that held all of Hyejoo’s favorite snacks.

Hyejoo looks around the room, completely speechless. Sooyoung clears her throat to speak instead.

“Um, me and your mother thought it would be good. For you to have more space for your game things. We thought maybe your room might be a little cramped-”

“Right we thought that. We don’t know for sure because we’ve never been in your room ever in our lives so how could we know that. We don’t! HAHA.” Jiwoo interjects nervously, and Sooyoung takes her arm, trying to keep her from saying anything else.

“ANYWAY,” Sooyoung looks at her wife with wide eyes and then turning back to her daughter. “We thought you might like a new space for yourself.”

“Th- Thank you...” Hyejoo feels like she’s floating as she runs her hands along the walls up to her new enormous TV.

“OH I LEFT THE CAMERA DOWNSTAIRS NOBODY MOVE!” Jiwoo says loudly, as she escapes Sooyoung’s grasp to run down the stairs.

Sooyoung and Hyejoo stand alone in the younger girl’s new game room. Sooyoung scratches the back of her neck.

“So do you- Um...do you like- you know...it?” She asks awkwardly. Her daughter turns to her.

“Um. Yeah. This is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen...” Hyejoo says, still in awe.

“Merry Christmas then.” Sooyoung says with a sigh of relief.

“Oh shoot.” Hyejoo says, snapping out of her trance. She pulls a little box out of her back pocket.

“Um.” Hyejoo says, slowly making her way over to her mother. “I... made this for you.” She extends her hand out.

Sooyoung cautiously takes the box, causing Hyejoo to immediately withdraw, wanting to put her attention on anything else just in case her mother didn’t like it.

Sooyoung unwraps the small box carefully and opens the lid. Underneath is a small figure resembling a person. It has long dark hair, is very slim, and wears a very sleek and fashionable business suit. On the hand of the figure is a small button. Sooyoung presses it.

“I’M A COOL MOM.” The figure says robotically, and Sooyoung smiles. She hits the button again.

“SUCCESS.” The figure says, causing Sooyoung to laugh a little. She presses the hand one more time.

“I’M A MILF.” It exclaims. Instantly, Hyejoo speaks up to explain herself.

“Yejin made me put that in there. She would not leave me alone until I promised her that it was in there.” Hyejoo says, avoiding eye contact with her mother.

Sooyoung takes the figure out of the box to see that it is attached to a keychain. “You made this? Like with the voice and everything?”

“Yeah. I’m kind of good and making. Electronics. And stuff...” Hyejoo says, looking at the present in her mother’s hands.

“Yeah I’m starting to realize that.” Sooyoung says, putting the figure in her onesie pocket. “Thank you. I like it a lot.”

“You’re welcome.” Hyejoo says, shying away from her mother’s strange display of kindness.

“OKAY I GOT IT.” Jiwoo says from outside the room as she bounds through the door. “It was in between the couch.” She says, holding up her phone.

“Come around me please. Say Christmas selfie!” Jiwoo says as her family comes up to her.

“You both better SMILE.” Jiwoo says, bordering a threat.

As commanded, everyone in the picture is showing teeth, and Jiwoo takes a billion before lowering the phone.

“I love you both so much. Now let’s play Mario Kart on Hyejoo’s new game thingy!” Jiwoo says excitedly running over to collapse on a recliner.

“The Wii is not new.” Hyejoo says, but giggles on her way over to her mom, who already has a controller in hand. She looks over at her taller mother. “Do you want to play too?” She asks shyly.

“Um...” Sooyoung trails off. “I don’t know how to play.”

Jiwoo gets up and loops her arm through her wife’s. “Don’t worry honeybear. I’ll teach you.” With that, Jiwoo places a delicate kiss on Sooyoung’s cheek and drags her over to the couches with her.

Sooyoung gets last place in every race. She nearly throws a fit every time she falls off of Rainbow Road.

But Jiwoo kisses her every time she loses and Hyejoo gives her pointers on how to improve.

She may be terrible at Mario Kart, but maybe she wasn’t so bad at having a family. At least, not on Christmas.

Chapter End Notes

omg that was long as hell! it was kind of interesting to initially cowrite so many scenes i wouldn’t normally so i hope u guys still like it! look forward to 2jin in the next chapter as well as the fun backstory spin off for 2jin that will be released with it! let us know your thoughts and stuff!! Also im seeing itzy in nyc so everyone say hi to me :p-daniela

HEYYY YOU leave a comment :DDD And like Daniela said there wasn’t any 2Jin this chapter but they are big next chapter (New Year’s special) so stay tuned <3 - Cat

- curiouscat.me/catmsdqna (Cat)

New Year's Eve (3Jin Smackdown)

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT: You must read our bonus chapter of 3Jin's backstory before reading this chapter! read here → tinyurl.com/3jinbackstory

and as you may have NOTICED these holiday chapters don't have much plot-progressing or (main) character-developing drama and they're just very fun and indulgent!!

enjoy, your favorite characters won't be happy forever <3

- Cat

yeah we're gonna make them SUFFER soon ^ - daniela

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jinsol Kim wakes up, like always, to the picturesque view of the glistening Pacific Ocean and the even more breathtaking sight of her sleeping wife.

Still fast asleep, Jungeun looks heavenly under the gentle rays of the rising sun. Lips slightly parted, she's snuggled comfortably under their thick white comforter only inches away, shoulders rhythmically rising and falling. Jinsol loves her wife's signature fire, but especially loves when she's perfectly serene. The blonde can't resist tucking her hair behind her ear and planting soft kisses all over her face.

Jungeun never minds - this is her favorite way to wake up.

The brunette stirs with a calm smile. With eyes still closed, she welcomes her wife's morning love and comes closer to her under the covers.

Jinsol takes her favorite person into her arms, tucking her under her chin as they intertwine their limbs to enjoy each other's warmth. Their mornings together had indefinitely become more affectionate ever since their new routine led to them waking up together.

Jungeun yawns into her chest, then mumbles something unintelligible.

"Hmm?" Jinsol asks, playing with her wife's soft hair with closed eyes.

"Don't go to work," Jungeun croaks out more clearly.

Alas, as much as the Kim family has treasured her time off, Jinsol could not stay away from work forever. This week has been her first that she's returned to the Aquarium of the Pacific to resume her active duties as its chief executive officer.

Jinsol just smiles as she nuzzles her wife, breathing in her comforting signature scent reminiscent of vanilla and brown sugar. "I have to," she mumbles sleepily. "I'll take Choerry today," Jinsol adds, referring to their parenting initiative of alternating car trips. "You had a long night..."

Jungeun hums graciously at the offer. "...No, no I'll do it baby. I'm scheduled."

Jinsol's eyes flutter open once again as she leans down to pepper more kisses on her wife's big head. "But you're tired..."

"I promised Choerry I'd try her Starbucks drink this morning." Jungeun yawns into Jinsol's blonde hair at her neck. "We pinky promised."

Jinsol is always in awe at how Jungeun will always put even the most trivial wants of their daughter before any of hers, especially right now, when her wife can barely get through a sentence without a yawn. "Are you sure?"

"Mhmpf," Jungeun says groggily, "I'll drive her."

Jinsol massages her wife's back under her loose shirt. She moves to meet Jungeun's eyes. "What's our plan for New Year's?" the blonde asks between them. "Since I'm off this year." (Jinsol refuses to let work take another holiday ever again.)

Jungeun's heart swells with the showering of affection as Jinsol trails kisses from her temple, cheek, and nose. "You're coming with me to Jiwoo and Sooyoung's party. 'Chuu Year's Yves.'"

Jinsol breaks apart and groans dramatically, like Jungeun asked her to count the strands of her own hair instead of accompany her at Beverly Hills' biggest, most extravagant celebration that most would kill for an invite to.

Most, i.e., everyone but Jinsol.

"UGHHH," Jinsol protests dramatically, face contorting in disgust. "Not *Sooyoung*-"

"Yes," Jungeun supplements sternly, cupping her wife's cheek calmly while the other woman pouts. "We are going," she yawns again into her hand. "Choerry is going too, to keep Hyejoo company."

Jinsol tuts again with an unnecessary eye roll.

But when she looks back at Jungeun, head pillowed and looking lovingly back at her with those gorgeous brown eyes, Jinsol forgets any reason she ever had to complain.

"...Fine," Jinsol whispers delicately beside her with a smitten smile. "Only for you."

Jungeun crinkles her nose triumphantly, then leans into Jinsol's kiss.

And right on cue, Jinsol's alarm for work pings noisily through the master bedroom.

Their lips break apart, and Jungeun looks at her wife with pleading puppy eyes. "Stay with me," she pouts.

Jinsol smiles back at the adorable sight, then allows herself one more kiss from her wife before forcing herself up to sit up in bed.

Jinsol rubs a hand over Jungeun's shoulder. "I'll be home before you know it sweetheart."

Jungeun closes her eyes once again to relish in a bit more sleeping time.

Before she is whisked off to dreamland once again though - "I wish we could stay in bed all day," she fantasizes, cuddling into Jinsol's pillow as a substitute for her soulmate, cherishing the

remnants of her scent. “Forever and ever and ever and ever...” Jungeun trails off wistfully.

The CEO smiles as she squeezes her wife’s hand from the side of their bed. “I would *love* that,” Jinsol admits before kissing it.

But until then, it’s off to work.

tiddie jugglers

Choerry: When I’m head of the EPA the amount of carbon dioxide that can be emitted by each individual is going to be so low that you’re only going to be able to exhale like 10 times a day

Choerry: This is the future

Choerry: I am the future

Chaewon: wtf are you talking about

Yejin: bitch Juice WRDL is DEAD

Choerry: Who is that

Yejin: A 40 MINUTE INTRO TO JUICE WRDL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9qJ_2xplLc

Yeri: i got my grade back today for the christmas art project from before break, and im about to shake my little ass to 7 rings thats how RICH im feelin ♀

Chaewon: you act like my mom didn’t give us all 100%

Yejin: i got a 78 the fuk 🤢

Hyejoo: you drew your head crowning out of beyonce’s vagina and expect ms. wong to put that up on the wall during parent teacher conferences?

Yejin: it was CHRISTMAS themed. EVERYONE suddenly has something to say when we wanna make christmas about the nativity of the LORD

Choerry: Yejin I thought it was pretty!! :)

Yejin: nice to know that choerry is the only one with an opened third eye

Yejin: mother vivisa still the goat tho 😊

Yejin: anyway WHAT is the move for nye im tryna pop these bottles

Yeri: you cant even open your own gatorade you always ask olivia to do it for you

Yejin: STOP USING RANDOM ASS EMOJIS

Yeri: yes

Yejin: ??????

Hyejoo: i'm stuck at home because of my moms' stupid party.

Yeojin: wait isnt that the party only for billionaires and celebrities???

Choerry: My moms and I are going!! :D

Yeri: choerry said you all are poor! she said you are of the lower class!

Chaewon: WOW how come choerry was invited and not us

Hyejoo: i didn't even know choerry was coming.

Choerry: My moms told me your mom wants me to come and keep you company :DDDD

Hyejoo: actually

Hyejoo: that's not a bad idea... if anything we can all just chill in my new game room my moms got me for christmas

Yeojin: STOP your moms got you a whole ROOM for christmas? i got a shaq autobiography and pitbulls concert on DVD.

Choerry: I didn't even know Pitbull had a concert movie

Yeojin: he doesnt. someone recorded pitbulls concert on their iphone and put it on a dvd and my mom purchased it for \$200.

Yeri: damn have fun at the party choerry

Hyejoo: no guys, the rest of you please come too. on behalf of the ha family i cordially extend an invitation to chuu year's yves.

Yeojin: ur parents r corny as fuck

Choerry: Am I not enough for you? :(

Hyejoo: no :p

Choerry: :(

Hyejoo: i'm jk choerry. but it'd be more fun if we were all there.

Choerry: :)

Hyejoo: also as you all may know last year nicki minaj came...

Chaewon: BITJHSDKD HELLO ?@#?\$?

Choerry: And Ariana?

Yeri: she cant bc she's on tour. i would know, im seeing her again next week ♀ ♀ ♀

Yeojin: thats ur fifth time this month??

Yeri: and what about it 🏔

Yeri: anyway im coming. as ke\$ha once said, the party dont start til i walk in

Yeojin: about herself not you

Yeri: omg stop im having war flashbacks about my dead hamster

Yeojin: RIP ke\$ha the hamster. gone too soon.

Yeri: BITCH YOURE THE ONE THAT KILLED HER

Yeojin: ANYWAY... i think i can come bc it's not like my mom can stop me

Yeojin: she hurt herself yesterday

Yeojin: lost her grip adjusting her bra, punched herself in the fucking face and fell down the stairs
🤡

Chaewon: damn why you make all that up about your poor mom just say you dont have plans

Yeojin: I'M BEING SERIOUS??? ALL MY RELATIVES ARE COMING OVER TO OUR HOUSE THIS YEAR BC HER ASS IS BRUISED SO SHE CANT MOVE AND IM SCARED... thats like 20 haseul clones...

Yeri: guys i found an unopened pregnancy test earlier and when i used it i was lowkey disappointed i wasn't.

Choerry: ?!?!?!?!?!?

Chaewon: ^ ????

Hyejoo: yeri why would you be pregnant.

Chaewon: why would you WANT to be pregnant? 🤡

Yeri: i want to struggle bringing a child into the world so I can look back and be like. wow.

Yeojin: something is wrong with you like in ur head

Yeri: omg my mom says that

Chaewon: oli i asked my mom and she said I can goooo :)))

Choerry: Yay we can all go!! 😊

Hyejoo: ok cool. everyone be here before 9 tmrw. that's when the party starts.

It's half past 9PM on New Year's Eve, and the air is electric with excitement among the invitees to the world's most exclusive and unnecessarily extravagant party of the year.

The Kim family sits on the calmer end of the spectrum. Pulling her white Tesla up to the peak of

Beverly Hills to the Has' massive private property, Jinsol had only agreed to this to accompany her beloved wife.

It didn't hurt that they dressed lavish for the occasion. Jungeun and Jinsol both don elegant black dresses that once sported sinful price tags. Jinsol's is backless, with her hair spilling over her shoulders in light blonde waves. And Jungeun's hair is up, revealing dangling diamond earrings (one of many Christmas presents from her wife).

Choerry, no need to dress up considering she would be in Hyejoo's room the whole night and away from the 21+ event, wears a soft and fuzzy purple sweater and a black denim skirt.

A valet man in a tuxedo comes to their car window, and the trio step out of the Tesla in sync and gaze at the front of Sooyoung and Jiwoo's massive mansion.

Was it supposed to be a classy party? Jinsol can't really tell, since the grandiose estate is reverberating with the force of three nightclubs in one.

The rival CEO is also surprised to note that the Ha residence is much, *much* bigger than it was ten years ago when she'd first visited for their Hyejoo's third birthday. What once was a relatively large modern home has now evolved into... Something else entirely...? Several expansions to the house itself have clearly been made, making the mansion itself quadruple in size from the CEO's last memory of it.

Jinsol has, quite literally, never seen or even imagined *anything* like it before. (Rumor has it that the house was self-designed by Jiwoo, in her infinite architectural prowess, and that Sooyoung barked at construction workers to make it reality no matter how far her wife's ideas may have defied the laws of physics.)

The golden light through the windows coupled with shimmering water from their gigantic central fountain make the residence as inviting as ever.

Over the low bass line of the music and the whistle of the night wind, Jinsol spots her nemesis. The one and only Sooyoung Ha is elegantly looking down at everyone else from the mansion's roof with a skinny champagne glass in her hand. The fashion queen catches a glimpse of Jinsol, and even from far away the blonde swears she can see her make a sour face before retreating from the balcony, much to Jinsol's amusement.

Jinsol walks towards the other side of her car to be with her wife and daughter, and Jungeun reaches to hold her warm hand and lace their fingers together.

"Oh look, there's Yeri!" their eighth grade daughter chirps, noticing her friend from school at the entrance of the mansion's east wing doing the Renegade Tik Tok dance to catch her attention. Yeri had come down to meet her and take her up to Hyejoo's new game room, where the rest of the gang currently is.

"Okay, I'm gonna go now," Choerry announces, looking back up at her mothers.

Jungeun leans down a tad to kiss her child's forehead, and Choerry is entranced by the smell of her mother's perfume. "Be safe," Jungeun instructs sternly. "Stay with them in the room and *don't* go into the party. Do not enter the west wing at all. Do not drink anything you see just laying around on your way up, do you understand me? And don't-"

"Okay, okay," Jinsol laughs off her wife's excessive instructions, putting her hands on her shoulders. She looks at their daughter. "Have fun angel, we'll see you in a few hours okay?"

“Okay, love you,” Choerry says, giving both her mothers a quick hug before running off to meet Yeri. They watch her until she’s safely inside, then look at each other.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Jinsol says, feigning a smile and pretending to be more excited than she actually is.

Jungeun smiles at her in response, and together they walk toward the entrance to the Ha mansion’s west wing, hand-in-hand.

The couple walks through the excessively large doorway to an elegant golden hallway which looks something out of a Victorian movie. It leads to a grandiose ballroom that neither of them even knew the Has had in their estate. Tables covered in decadent white sheets were placed perfectly around the room as dimmed white lights illuminated the guests as clone-like waiters scurried around to serve the guests champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

“You know with all the noise outside, I thought this would be a whole lot crazier,” the CEO admits, taking a look around at the ballroom which is playing some music, but is mostly filled with the chirps of conversation.

“WHY ARE YOU TWO IN THE BORING ROOM?” squeals the cheery voice of Jiwoo Ha as if she just knew they’d arrived. Seeing her favorite couple, she immediately runs over to greet them with a giant group hug before they can even take in the fact that she is shimmering in a gorgeous silver dress and diamonds. “You both look so beautiful!” their hostess cheers between their ears as the married couple do their best not to fall backwards.

“...We’re in the boring room?” Jungeun asks, her cheek squished against Jiwoo’s bare shoulder. The internationally famous celebrity finally releases them from her grip, and Jinsol adjusts her neck.

“Yes! This is just for the older range of guests that we invite. Ellen!” Jiwoo does a friendly wave at the TV show talk show host who is sitting near the corner of the room. The woman waves back, like they’ve been friends forever.

“So... Where are we supposed to go?” Jinsol questions.

Jiwoo looks at them like she’s about to share a dirty little secret. “Right this way, VIPs...” she whispers excitedly, taking both of their hands and dragging them to yet another hallway leading to the most giant set of double doors at the end of the golden ballroom Jinsol has ever seen in her life, like something out of a Vatican church.

“This is where the fun is happening. You’re going to love it!” Jiwoo screams with excitement as she opens the doors.

And it feels as though the three women just entered a completely different universe.

It’s a new two-story ballroom now, but sleek and modern and *pounding* with party music. Hundreds of guests occupy one dance floor, as some famous DJ neither Jungeun nor Jinsol recognize spins records dramatically at the front of the room. Acrobats are doing tricks on a wire that is hung above the dancing guests with no net. Why? Who knows.

Around the dance floor, there are areas for seating, some even on the second floor balcony, where celebrities from American pop stars to the English crown were laughing and drinking free expensive drinks. Jinsol is perplexed at the absolutely random circus acts being performed at uncoordinated areas, whether it was a man eating a sword or someone stuffing themselves inside of

a box. There was an open bar in the back of the room and where an exotic woman in a shiny silver bikini was holding a tiger on a leash.

“Is that a tiger?” Jungeun asks.

“Yeah I don’t even know, she came with the Cirque Du Soleil act.” Jiwoo screams over the music.

“WOO! CHUU YEARS YVES!” A regal Latina woman whoops passing by, and Jiwoo sends finger guns back at her.

“Was that *J-LO*?” Jinsol reacts, her eyes coming out of her head.

“Yeah! My cousin-” Jiwoo replies.

“*J-LO IS YOUR COUSIN?!*” Jinsol shouts over the music.

“YOU DIDN’T LET ME FINISH SILLY!” Jiwoo says. “My cousin Yoojung *knows* her! They worked together before or something I don’t know, but she’s here... And look who else is heeere! EEE!”

Jinsol rolls her eyes and stares into an imaginary camera as if she were on *The Office* , already knowing the only person who could make Jiwoo more giddy than she already was.

Sooyoung Ha approaches them, the same actively twinkling drink in her hand and as ego-filled as ever. Jiwoo almost gets distracted by how dazzling Sooyoung looks tonight, her deep blue gown and lacy thin blue gloves around her hands make her look like a princess straight out of a Hollywood set.

“Jungeun!” The Korean accent comes out a little as she greets the shorter woman with a hug. She doesn’t even bother to fully look at the woman on Jungeun’s arm. “Jinsol,” she allows, her eyes somewhere else.

“Hello S-”

“I have to go chat with Barack and Michelle, but I’ll find you later alright?” Sooyoung cuts Jinsol off abruptly and looks at Jiwoo who nods in response, giving her wife a kiss on the cheek. Jiwoo begins chatting with Jungeun about some massive dessert she was planning to debut tonight, as Sooyoung starts walking away.

Before Sooyoung departs the trio though, she leans in to whisper to the other CEO’s ear.

“Listen up you parasite, I don’t know how you keep popping up everywhere I go, but I’m going to avoid you starting now so do not even *attempt* to interact with me.” She finishes.

“Wh-”

Before Jinsol can even finish her word, Sooyoung is parading away calmly, the train of her million dollar gown flowing behind her.

“Well I have to make my rounds!” Jiwoo takes Jungeun and Jinsol’s hands in her own. “But you two find a seat or hit the floor or get a drink **WHATEVER YOU WANT YOU CAN HAVE. DO YOU HEAR THAT?**”

Jiwoo looks expectantly at the bartender quite a ways away and the security guard by the door who both shake their heads excessively. With that, Jiwoo smiles and reluctantly let’s go of their hands

and walks away.

Jungeun turns to her wife after refusing a tray of the same sparkling purple drink she saw in Sooyoung's hand.

"So," Jungeun starts. "Wanna go find some breadsticks?"

"BRRRATATATAT!" Chaewon screams to the tune of "Megatron" by Nicki Minaj as she shoots multiple video game civilians dead. The screen on the massive flat screen TV is split four ways; every girl except Yeri is playing a multiplayer game of *Call of Duty Infinite Warfare* .

"*They call me Megatron, just did the telethon, he got Margiela's on, and I get my jealous on-*" Chaewon raps as she directs her virtual soldier around to continue killing people. Hyejoo feels the vibrations of her crush rapping on her own shoulder; the tinier girl is comfortably snug up against her side under a shared fleece throw.

Choerry stares at the giant game room TV as well in a bean bag chair, running her character around and using all her med kits on other players.

"Choerry!" their principal's daughter scolds closeby from another bean bag chair. "Why are you healing them! They aren't even on your team!"

"I'm just trying to be nice!"

"CAN YOU GO BACK TO SHOOTING THEM INSTEAD!" Hyejoo screams.

"AAAAAAAHAH!" Poor Choerry spins her character 360 degrees, firing the assault rifle in all directions, but getting headshots one after another. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" she says after every time she murders a virtual human.

Yeri, in the corner, is keeping herself entertained by taking multiple pictures of Hyejoo's new dog, Dog, and putting together an Instagram profile for the pup that really does remind her of a piece of fried chicken.

The Ha family decided that Hyejoo's game room would be the best place for Dog to sleep (so it wouldn't shit on all the expensive furniture), so Hyejoo always had some form of company now whenever she would play her games or tinker with electronics. She complained at first, insisting Dog would disrupt her gaming experience, but Jiwoo had insisted. However, much to Hyejoo's surprise, the puppy always seemed to know his limits with the girl, always staying put when the controller was in her hands.

Now, the adorable little puppy whines and cries whenever Hyejoo is out of sight, even when she goes to the bathroom. Hyejoo isn't supposed to, but sometimes she lets him sleep at the foot of her bed for the night, unable to stand the cries of him being so lonely in the dark.

"Now give me SEXY," Yeri orders Dog as she aims the iPhone camera at him.

"Did they text you yet..." Chaewon murmurs into Hyejoo's warm shoulder.

Hyejoo bites her lip in nervousness; she told her mothers to text her if Nicki Minaj shows up, and they haven't all night. "No, not yet..."

Chaewon makes a pouty noise, and Hyejoo hates that she can feel the other girl's disappointment.

The blonde yawns. “I’m gonna stop playing now, I don’t even like zombies mode,” she says as she logs her character out of the game and her corner of the screen turns black.

“We aren’t even in zombies mode dipshit,” Yeojin snickers.

“Whatever? It’s making me carsick too.” The other SoundCloud rapper replies, clutching her stomach.

“Wait you can have a car in this game? Why have I been running this whole time?” Choerry asks, taking out another player in only one shot. “Sorry!”

“HOW THE FUCK ARE YOU GETTING ALL THESE HEADSHOTS?!” Hyejoo shouts in frustration, having to pull the trigger more than once to kill one of her opponents.

“There are no cars Choerry. Chae is just quitting because she sucks at this game.” Yeojin says, firing her character’s weapon rapidly and in a circle until she finally hits someone. “OWNED, BITCH! THAT’S PRECISION!”

“Okay first of all, I’m pretty *and* talented so I win all the games by default.” Chaewon responds, sitting up a little just to flip her hair.

“Someone lied to you several times,” Yeojin deadpans.

“Are you trying to fight?” Chaewon bickers, her high-pitched almost helium-like voice contrasting with Yeojin’s animalistic growl of a voice always making everything ten times more amusing in addition to the fact that they’re both under five feet tall. “We can fight right now. Right here bitch.”

“I was just saying, we were never in a car.” Yeojin defends, enjoying getting a rise out of her while she follows Choerry’s character in the video game.

“I am always in a car. Heading down a road called life.” Chaewon claps back.

“I aM aLwAyS iN a CaR! HeAdInG dOWn a RoAd cALLed LiFe!” Yeojin mocks, raising her gritty voice to the highest octave it can possibly be at. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know I was talking to my mom’s Pinterest board.”

“You’re just mad because you know my new song is better than yours,” Chaewon blurts randomly.

“You have absolutely no fucking flow.”

“Not according to my seven streams so far!”

“Yeah all of those were me stupid,” Yeojin scoffs as she continues playing the video game.

“Couldn’t stop laughing. You sounded like the other day during popcorn reading when you kept fucking stuttering and had to re-read the same sentence six times.” Yeri starts cackling at Yeojin’s comment, remembering how frustrating it was for the entire class to be looking at the same body of text unable to be read correctly. “I almost had to go to the nurse’s office-”

“You love to shit on the working class!” Chaewon snaps.

“Ladies, ladies,” Hyejoo says monotonously, ever-defensive of Chaewon. “Chill-” Someone in the game shoots at Hyejoo’s character, killing her and making her fourth of the screen exit from the game. She slumps aggressively on the couch, trying not to throw a tantrum.

Only Yeojin and Choerry remain, the latter focusing so hard on the screen that her tongue is sticking out.

“YES MODEL MODEL YES YOU’RE GIVING ME KIM KARDASHIAN ASS YOU’RE GIVING ME LADY GAGA INTELLIGENCE.” Yeri screams nonsensically as Dog rolls over on the floor.

“FUCK!” Yeojin screams as her character gets shot in the face. “YERI THAT WAS ALL YOUR FAULT YOU LOUD BITCH!”

Yeri flips Yeojin off, and then turns back to the animal. “Dog, we’re taking five. I’m so sorry for the behavior of my crew tonight.”

Choerry makes her character hide behind a rock, and Hyejoo rolls her eyes. “Choerry you can’t just... Hide and expect the guys to come to you that’s-”

Suddenly Choerry stands up and shoots once, immediately sending the last remaining player on the other team to the ground. **WINNER** flashes across her corner of the screen. Hyejoo’s mouth hangs open.

“That was fun! I can’t believe I’ve never played this before!” Choerry cheers, smiling innocently.

Chaewon looks at Hyejoo nervously and then hands her a pillow. Hyejoo graciously accepts it, and then shoves her face into it, screaming bloody murder. She puts the pillow down, and Chaewon rubs her shoulder sympathetically.

“Cool.” Hyejoo says calmly.

Dog starts whining a little, eyes pleading while looking at Yeri.

“Olivia, can you get me some dog treats? The talent is hungry.” Yeri states, looking at the couch.

Right at that moment, Chaewon breaks away from Hyejoo’s side and flops facedown onto the floor.

“I would kill for a cupcake.” She mumbles. “Almost as much as I would kill for Nicki...”

Hyejoo lets out a deep sigh. “Alright. I’ll be back. You can pick the next game.” She says to Choerry as she stands.

“KARAOKE!” Choerry screams excitedly, and Yeojin groans as Hyejoo makes her way out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

“Wait, Olivia I’m going with you,” Yeojin steps up from her bean bag chair. “I can’t do Karaoke, I don’t want to embarrass everyone here.”

Chaewon rolls her eyes, but Yeojin ignores it. “Plus new mixtape soon, gotta rest the pipes.”

Hyejoo hums in approval, and the two girls exit the game room into the hallway. Booming party music from the west wing reaching all the way to living quarters in the east.

Although Jiwoo had strictly instructed her daughter to stay in her room and not come out for safety purposes (even conducting hourly check-ups), Hyejoo figured she wouldn’t get in trouble for grabbing some snacks.

To her, the night has been going swimmingly so far; that may or may not be solely because her

favorite tiny blonde had cuddled up to her ever since Choerry recited Malala Yousafzai's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech by heart while Yeri did vocal runs in the background.

Despite them being in an entertainment room, the Tiddie Jugglers found themselves more unentertained than they anticipated due to the longing for being downstairs at the main event.

Hyejoo and Yeojin descend from the oversized grand foyer, the middle schoolers looking even smaller than they already are.

"I would kill for some Pop Chips right now," Yeojin says, a few feet in front of her bounding toward the Has' storage room for snacks that's the size of a standard college dorm room.

"No, Chae likes gummy bears," Hyejoo declares.

"You *would* get what she wants," Yeojin snickers over the bass of the party music both girls can physically feel.

"Shut the fuck up!" Hyejoo exclaims, turning red.

"Why do you even like her," Yeojin chortles teasingly.

Hyejoo is silent as they reach the final stairs.

"Well?" Yeojin half-turns to meet the eyes of her classmate, who just looks away nervously.

"...I think she's like.. a real life princess." Hyejoo answers awkwardly, the sweet words sounding unusual as they spill off the eighth grader's normally sharp tongue.

"BARF! BARF BARF BARF," Yeojin makes a disgusted expression and more gagging noises as she runs off towards the snack room.

The kitchen is straight ahead, but the music from the party calls her attention as she peeks down the corridor to catch the closest glimpse she's ever had in person to her mothers' annual Chuu Year's Yves party.

The eighth grader doesn't see much at the entrance to the west wing, but she does see a server stand with a circular tray in one hand supporting a pyramid of croissants and other expensive bread.

In front of him is someone, a young Asian teenage girl with athletic build, taking multiple and... Piling them into a tupperware? And she looks awfully familiar...

Wait a second- "Hyunjin?" Hyejoo asks to herself, nearing her babysitter and puzzled. The highschooler looks insanely out of place, as she dons a simple gray hoodie and jeans as opposed to designer outfit like everyone else.

Yejin comes toward her with a tub of gummy bears from the snack room, but Hyejoo tells her to go ahead and that she'll meet her back upstairs.

The raven-haired eighth grader toes the line of her house's west wing.

"HYEJOO!" Hyunjin yells in excitement, making the croissants server wince. She sets the tupperware down, a few croissants still being juggled in her arms.

"Olivia." Hyejoo corrects sharply.

“My baby!” the bright babysitter rushes over. “How are you my widdle eighth grade emo angel from hell,” Hyunjin lowers her hand to pinch Hyejoo’s cheeks but her hand is immediately slapped away.

“What are you doing here Hyunjin?” Hyejoo asks in a dry voice.

“Oh, your moms invited me to Chuu Year’s Yves this year! Can you believe it?! But I just came for these *bomb* croissants! Your mom got me them from Paris for my birthday last year and she said she’d have them here. You know, I’ve never had bread *this* good-”

“Hyunjin?!” Speaking of Jiwoo, the celebrity has suddenly materialized at the pair’s side. “You’re here!” The bubbly woman smiles warmly as she embraces Hyunjin in a tight hug, as if they were childhood friends as opposed to a rich woman and her teenage employee. “Hyejoo, I thought I told you to stay inside your room,” she scolds lightly.

“Oh I know, I just wanted to say hi to Hyunjin-”

“REALLY?” Hyunjin swoons even louder than the loud party music. “You did?”

“...Anyways, I was just gonna get some snacks for Choerry and them upstairs.”

Jiwoo redirects her attention to Hyunjin. “Hyunjin you should stay for the whole thing!” she offers; despite the party being highly elite there is not a single condescending aspect in Jiwoo’s tone as she offers out of genuine loving kindness.

“Oh thank you so much Mrs. Ha, but I actually have to get back in time for a high school party.” Hyunjin says with a gracious smile.

A high school party? Hyejoo’s eyes widen.

“OoOoh! So exciting!” Jiwoo chirps, and the woman looks more excited than Hyunjin does. Hyunjin, behind her enthusiastic facade, looks a bit... apprehensive? “I miss high school parties! I used to spider crawl on the ceiling, you know. You can’t do that anymore. The political climate, it’s all messed up,” Jiwoo says with her hands in the air.

Suddenly, a lightbulb turns on inside Hyejoo’s head.

“I just need to get my jacket from the coat check!” Hyunjin continues.

An actual fun party... Hyejoo thinks to herself. She hated the fact that the girls were getting bored in her room. But she’s decided to change that.

“You know what!” Hyejoo offers suddenly, in the most enthusiastic tone she’s used all month. “Why don’t I go get that for you Hyunjin!”

Even Jiwoo looks surprised at her daughter’s very uncharacteristic altruism. Hyejoo fights the urge to stammer as the two older figures look at her in confusion. “There’s probably going to be a long coat check line anyway, you’ll never get to your party on time. I can just get it for you quick!”

“Wow, thanks Hyejoo!” Hyunjin gasps suddenly with a big smile, handing Hyejoo her coat ticket. “Does that mean we’re *besties* now!?” she quickly tacks on with a wink.

“...Haha!” Hyejoo throws up finger guns as she walks backwards into the party towards the coat room with the identifying slip of paper. “I’ll be right back!”

“Go back to your room straight after!” Jiwoo calls to her child who is vanishing into the crowd of well-dressed people. The hostess looks back at Hyunjin with a big smile. “Ugh, she is such a great kid.”

“I know, she’s a little sweetie,” Hyunjin indulges Jiwoo, disregarding the fact that she knows Hyejoo was suspended from school for nearly putting her entire PE class in a dodgeball-induced coma.

“Well, I’m glad you’re enjoying the croissants,” Jiwoo giggles, noting the many still piled in Hyunjin’s arms and the tupperware on the floor. “Take as many as you want!” she reassures lovingly, not at all minding Hyunjin’s making the most of the party favors. “We actually have another truck full in the back so you can-”

Jiwoo is interrupted by another member of her staff tapping her exposed shoulder gently, then whispering something in her ear.

Jiwoo’s nostrils flare. “*What do you mean the cake is falling down.*”

Hyunjin’s eyes widen as the staff member continues to whisper in her ear.

Jiwoo very briefly squeezes the bridge of her nose before taking a deep sigh. “I have to do everything in this house,” she mutters. “Excuse me Hyunjin, I have to go deal with a confectionary emergency.”

“Oh no problem!”

Jiwoo smiles once more with a “Happy Chuu Year’s!” before taking off.

As the happy pill celebrity walks stressfully (borderline jogs) through the central ballroom, past Rihanna and who she thinks she recognizes as former President George W. Bush, she is stopped by a familiar pair of gentle hands on her shoulders.

“Hey hey,” It’s Sooyoung, looking down at her sweetheart with a concerned expression. “Jiwoo, what’s the problem?”

Jiwoo sighs. “The main cake, it might fall down. I have to balance it,” she explains hastily.

Sooyoung’s eyebrows shoot up. “The 15 foot tall cake?” she asks, to which her wife nods. “Is there anything I can do to help?” the CEO offers kindly.

“NO. NO ONE IS TOUCHING THAT CAKE BUT ME.” Jiwoo growls abruptly. Sooyoung stares at her with widened eyes. “But thank you for offering honey,” Jiwoo smiles sweetly.

“But I think there is something you can help with... Can you check on Hyejoo at 11:00? And every hour after that until the party ends? I actually haven’t been able to do my hourly check-ups on her because of how crazy everything’s been, but this specifically is really going to take me a while...” Jiwoo trails off.

“Of course,” Sooyoung smiles understandingly, yet there’s a hint of nervousness on her face. Of course, she’s also not completely processing the commitment she’s agreeing to anyway. “Now go fix our cake. Don’t fall in.”

“I won’t,” Jiwoo giggles and pecks her wife’s lips before taking off once again.

Sooyoung turns around, and gets lost in the crowd with another sip of champagne.

Hyejoo stumbles into the empty coat room nervously as music thumps through the walls, Hyunjin's ticket in hand. *Are you really about to do this? Are you really about to do this right now?*

Usually, Hyejoo would never take her chaotic antics this far. Especially on New Year's Eve, when her mother usually came in to check on her every hour. But this time, she had barely seen her mothers around at all.

Actually, she hadn't really seen her taller and more terrifying mother much since Christmas. It was like her mom had finally stopped being unnecessarily resentful toward her, but still didn't know how to communicate even if only to ask how her day was. So, the child noticed that Sooyoung had practically returned to how she acted before she joined the St. Jihyo's PTA in the first place, which was avoiding her daughter altogether instead.

And Hyejoo kind of needed an escape for herself too, if she was being honest.

The raven-haired eighth grader quickly identifies Hyunjin's beige coat labelled with the corresponding number on the ticket. She rustles through the pockets until her fingers hit the car keys, which she pulls out.

Hyejoo calls Yeojin on her iPhone.

Her friend picks up on the second ring. *"Hey Skrillex, what's taking you so long?"* Yeojin's gritty little voice comes through. *"Chaewon is about to perform '12 Days of Christmas' by Destiny's Child and I know Yeri is gonna join in. She's putting her hair up."*

"I have a crazy idea," Hyejoo plays with her babysitter's car keys nervously in her hands. "Do you guys wanna go to a party?"

"You mean the one downstairs? Bitch, I've been asking you all damn night I-"

"No," Hyejoo cuts Yeojin off. *"A high school party."*

"A HIGH SCHOOL PARTY?" Yeri shouts, interrupting the start of the other girls' performance. Hyejoo hears the other girls come towards the phone as well, their interests piqued.

"Oh my gosh, I want to go to a high school party!" she hears Chaewon say into the phone, and Hyejoo can practically see stars dancing in her pretty eyes.

"Yeah," Hyejoo replies. She isn't normally this mischievous, but tonight was uneventful, and the pre-teen was feeling adventurous. "I can get us into a *real* high school party." Her quiet voice echoes through the empty coat room.

The other St. Jihyo's students all yell variations of middle school excitement.

"Okay girllies," Hyejoo starts, feeling impulsively badass and in turn not thinking any of this through at all. But that doesn't matter - Chaewon isn't going to be bored anymore, and they're going to have a New Year's Eve to remember. "Are you ready for the plan?"

Thrilled, high-pitched cheers ring through the phone's speakers, and Hyejoo smiles excitedly.

"Okay listen," her tone turns serious. If she wants to pull this off, they need to sneak into Hyunjin's car before she gets there. "I need you all to be at my babysitter's car in no more than two minutes. It's not down the hill where the guest cars are, it's the yellow punch buggy in right in front of the

main fountain. TWO minutes, capeesh?"

"*Got it!*" They all say at the end of the line, before Hyejoo hears some rustling of belongings and Yeojin cuts the line.

Hyejoo stuffs Hyunjin's car keys into her pocket with the coat in hand, and instead of going in her babysitter's direction to return the coat, she bolts straight in the direction of the car.

Choerry can't *not* ask her moms for permission.

For a hot minute, with adrenaline coursing through her veins, she felt like a new person - but sneaking out just isn't in the student body president's blood.

"*Goodie goodie... But, respect,*" Yeojin teased when the student body president diverged paths insisting on asking her mothers first, saying she'll meet them outside.

So Choerry races through Hyejoo's moms' no-kids-allowed New Year's Eve party looking for her mothers, nearly getting lost in the giant house while doing so. From the top of an entirely different grand foyer, she is able to spot Jinsol alone near one corner of the colorfully lit party ballroom.

The pounding music nearly makes her deaf on the way, but pushing past many well-dressed adults, she runs up to her blonde mother out of breath.

"Choerry?" Jinsol notices her daughter approaching immediately with furrowed eyebrows. "You shouldn't be out here, where are your friends?" she questions, the CEO's maternal instincts immediately kicking in.

"Where's mommy?"

"She's in the bathroom- Is something wrong?"

"Can I go with Yeojin and them to a high school party nearby? We're going in Hyejoo's babysitter's car," Choerry asks, out of breath. She usually asks her other mother for permission for these types of things, but she's got no time to waste now.

Jinsol's eyes narrow as she looks down at her daughter. "Isn't Yeojin the gnome who keeps disrespecting me?" Choerry stifles a giggle. "And I forgot to tell you! At the bake sale your little friend Chaewon made fun of my hair."

Choerry gasps. "Oh no! What!? What did she say?"

Jinsol narrows her eyes even more, looking off into the distance bitterly. "She said it was fried," she grumbles.

"Well she's not wrong." Choerry says plainly, shocking her blonde mother.

"*Choerry!?* You're supposed to be on my side-"

"Can I go to the party?" Choerry asks rapidly, immediately changing the subject. She senses her mother's hesitation and quickly adds "We'll stay together! We'll be back before this party is over," despite the fact that Choerry has no idea when this party is supposed to end or where it even is. But Hyejoo must have it all figured out, right?

Jinsol still looks hesitant, so Choerry sticks out her bottom lip and turns on her puppy eyes. And it's

really hard to say no to those, especially since for years, she never had to.

“Promise me you’ll answer your phone.” Jinsol says seriously. “And text me when you get the-”

“YAY! Thank you! I love you!” Choerry squeals all in the same breath, hugs Jinsol quickly, then darts away before Jinsol can even blink.

Hyejoo sees Hyunjin’s yellow buggy from the window she stands by, and no signs of her friends yet. The eighth grader points the car keys towards the vehicle and watches as the lights flash, indicating that its doors have been unlocked.

She tucks the keys back into the coat pocket, then runs back in Hyunjin’s direction and tries not to look too suspicious in the process.

She finally sees her again, standing in the same place but now with more croissants. Hyunjin meets her eyes and smiles upon seeing the coat in the younger child’s arms.

“Hey! Sorry it took so long, haha!” Hyejoo smiles unnaturally, handing over the coat. “Alright! I need to get back to my room now!”

“Thank you my little pet!” Hyunjin cheers and Hyejoo cringes internally. “Well I hope you have a great rest of your winter break!” Hyunjin says, but Hyejoo is already turning the corner from which she initially came.

Hyejoo bursts out of the mansion with nothing but her now dead iPhone and an inexplicable amount of confidence. As she bolts out the front door of the east wing, she runs across the cobblestones past the central fountain aglow, spraying luminescent water rhythmically up to the sky. She sees Hyunjin’s yellow punch buggy, and her four friends are now standing by it.

Before any of them can say anything to her, Hyejoo unlocks the car. “Get in, get in get in get in NOW,” Hyejoo whisper-screams.

“What?” they ask, bewildered.

“GET IN BEFORE SHE SEES YOU!”

“WHAT?!?” The other kids ask, now scrambling to throw themselves in the backseat.

“I thought you said your babysitter was driving us!” Choerry shrieks.

“I said she would drive us, I didn’t say she would know!” Hyejoo snaps back in a panic. “Get the fuck in the car!”

“THERE ARE ONLY TWO SEATS IN THE BACK GENIUS, SO WHAT NOW?” Yeojin cries.

“THREE OF US ARE GOING TO SQUISH IN THE BACK. ONE IS GOING TO LAY DOWN ON THE FLOOR. ONE IS GOING IN THE TRUNK.” Hyejoo hisses, suddenly resembling her executive mother barking orders at her subordinates.

“Fuck it, Yeri in the trunk,” Yeri says, opening the trunk and jumping in causing the car to bounce up and down. She closes the trunk from the inside with no objections.

Choerry has a look of terror on her face. What is this? *Sneaking out?! She's never even done such a thing, even when her beloved boyfriend would beg her to. But Chaewon nudges her, so she hesitantly gets into the car; it's not like she has any other choice at this very moment. Chaewon scrambles into the back seat after her ending up in the middle, Hyejoo sliding in next to her, boosted slightly on top of a bag of cat food. Yeojin attempts to sit on the tiny sliver of seat left, but cannot manage to fit with the door closing.*

"YEOJIN JUST GET ON THE FLOOR." Hyejoo shouts.

"Olivia you know I love Lil Jon but are you really going to make me *Get Low* like this?!" Yeojin hisses angrily.

"FUCK FUCK FUCK, SHE'S COMING I SEE HER IN THE WINDOW!" Hyejoo's heart beats in her throat as she grabs Yeojin by the collar and throws her little body down to their feet, closing the car door soon after.

Hyunjin stands by the mansion door putting on her coat, just in time as the automatic lights inside her car dim to black.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck *FUCK*," Yeojin whispers from the floor in the pitch black darkness.

"SHHH! SHUT UP!" Chaewon spits fervidly.

"Everyone needs to be completely fucking still and not say *a word*. She won't see us when she gets in because of the dark," Hyejoo hisses. "She's fucking blind. Like literally, I think she stares into the sun or something."

"AND YOU'RE GONNA LET HER DRIVE-" Yeojin screams hysterically, only for Hyejoo to pick the bag of cat food up from under her and slam it in Yeojin's face. The car shakes a little from the outside, and Hyunjin nears the vehicle but doesn't seem to notice any of the chaos happening within.

"What about the party?!?" Chaewon's little voice pierces through the darkness.

"She's going to the party, and *we're* going to the party, she just can't know we're in the car!" Hyejoo whispers.

"*We have to be quiet for the whole ride?!?*" Yeojin asks in disbelief.

"We don't even have seatbelts..." Choerry says quietly, panicking at the situation's disarray.

"How are we gonna get home?!" Chaewon whispers looking at Hyejoo, asking the most important question of the night that all of them had neglected to think of. Hyejoo looks back at her and just stammers.

"She's right there oh my *God*," Choerry gasps, and she panics even more when she sees herself in the mirror. She then pushes Chaewon to her right, who pushes Hyejoo to her right, whose head is now pressed against the door. The three girls are now leaned like dominos and uncomfortable, but out of sight from Hyunjin's mirrors.

Those are the last noises out of the gang before Hyunjin walks up to her car's front door with her eyes on her Twitter feed. Locking her phone and dropping it into her coat pocket, she opens the driver's door and slides into the seat, completely unaware of the five kids behind her.

"Oh my god," Choerry mouths with wide eyes as the other girls stare at Hyunjin's back in horror.

The five girls don't even breathe as Hyunjin throws tupperware full of croissants into the passenger's seat and closes the car door. She lets out a long sigh.

The high school student starts up her little yellow car, and none of the eighth graders can even believe this is happening.

Around thirty minutes has passed since Hyunjin began driving out of the Ha residence. How she still hasn't noticed five stowaway eighth graders behind her, the group has no idea.

With the three in the backseat leaned on each other, and Yeojin excessively attempting to communicate in her own version of American sign language while laying on the dirty car floor, the eighth graders (save Yeri in the trunk) couldn't even entertain themselves with their phones without the danger of being discovered. Choerry worries painfully at the thought of both of her mothers texting her.

Hyejoo never said anything about the destination being far... But let's face it, the girls were too afraid to have the luxury of boredom at the moment.

At least Hyunjin turned on the music, the radio's noisy Top 40 hits concealing the sounds of breathing in the back. Yeojin, physically incapable of being silent, would really push their luck sometimes by trying to make the three girls above her laugh - like when she loudly whispered "Pee pee" and Choerry had to cover her mouth as she let out an insuppressible snort. Hyunjin, deaf as a post, somehow didn't hear it. Maybe she was just lost in her own head.

The kids snap their mouths shut though when Hyunjin suddenly turns off the car radio, the only sounds being the hum of the car and the whizzing of the cars beside them.

Hyejoo glances at Chaewon in confusion, the red light from a traffic post lighting up their faces. Choerry, who's angled enough to see Hyunjin, sees that the high school girl is connecting an aux cord to her iPhone to play her own music.

When the first noises of Hyunjin's selected song roll through like fog, Hyejoo recognizes them.

Searing low chords of a sun rising, a building chorus heard from underwater, the hypnotic percussion that is soon to follow - the eighth grader knows this one from saddening meltdowns she's had pining over Chaewon.

It's "Ribz", by Lorde.

"The drink... you... spilt all over me..." the car speakers slowly sing, a much more somber tone than anything out of Top 40 cacaphony.

"'Lover's Spit' left on repeat," Hyunjin joins in and sings along quieter and more serious than Hyejoo has ever, ever heard her. The older girl sings along to this song like its second-nature - and it clearly is as she proves to know every word.

What a sad song to know like the back of your hand.

Maybe they do have something in common after all, Hyejoo thinks to herself.

Hyunjin drives slow through empty suburban streets, singing along softly to the nostalgia as the beat picks up but the sunken tone remains.

The high schooler is completely entrenched in the melancholic melody, and the stowaways stare attentively at her in the darkness, each child as if trying to piece together the story behind the emptiness in the babysitter's voice.

"This dream isn't feelin' sweet... We're reeling through the midnight streets... And I've never felt more alone, it feels so scary, getting old..."

The kids, packed together like sardines in the backseat, feel Hyunjin's sadness diffuse through the air. The atmosphere is polar opposite to the euphoria from the togetherness of when they sang "Super Bass" in Mrs. Kim's car.

Choerry, from her angle, is able to catch a glimpse of defeated Hyunjin at the wheel.

Choerry doesn't know her, but her heart aches for her.

"Ribs" begins to speed up, and Hyunjin unexpectedly cranks her car stereo volume up as the song crescendos into desperation.

"I want 'em back! I want 'em back! The minds we had! The minds we had! How all the thoughts, how all the thoughts, moved 'round our heads-" Hyunjin calls out into the glass of her windshield painfully. *"I want 'em back! I want 'em back! The minds we had! The minds we had! It's not enough to feel the lack, I want 'em back I want 'em back, I WANT 'EM!"*

"YOU'RE THE ONLY FRIEND I NEED!" Hyunjin suddenly shouts at the top of her lungs. For the first time Hyejoo has ever heard, Hyunjin's voice goes weak.

The babysitter is no longer singing along, and the kids hear a snuffle and a shaky breath from the driver's seat.

"We'll laugh until our ribs get tough," the last words ring out from the speakers; Hyunjin has long since stopped singing. *"But that will never be enough."*

The car stereo falls quiet.

Hyunjin reaches desperately for unused Starbucks napkins in the door pocket to wipe at her red face.

No one knows how to respond.

But one of the St. Jihyo's eighth graders, bewitched by the cinematic haze that was Hyejoo's babysitter singing/crying to 'Ribs' by Lorde, has forgotten she isn't even supposed to say anything.

"Damn, who hurt you?" Yeojin looks up at Hyunjin in the rear-view mirror and asks abruptly, her gritty voice piercing through the car silence.

Hyejoo, Chaewon, and Choerry's eyes all nearly bulge out of their sockets.

Hyunjin's heart stops as she looks up into the rear-view mirror to see two beady little eyes staring at her in the darkness.

Yeojin's blown their cover.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Hyunjin screams in horror as she swerves the car violently, the yellow punch buggy veering off the road. Everyone is screaming as they bang around

the backseat. Yeri rolls and thuds around screaming “WEEEEEEEEEEEE!” in the trunk.

The car eventually comes to stop at the side of the road, but Hyunjin is still screaming. “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” She hits all the lights to illuminate the back seat to reveal three completely unfamiliar eighth graders and... *Hyejoo*? “WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY CAR?!” Hyunjin yells at them, still terrified. “GET OUT! GET OUT GET OUT!”

The four in her backseat, scared and not knowing what else to do in this moment having been caught, obey her orders and scramble out of the car. Hyunjin, too, gets out of her car and slams the door in complete disbelief. The whole time she’s been driving, there were *four* other people in the car with her?!

Manic giggling ensues from the trunk of her car.

Five?!?! “IS SOMEONE IN MY TRUNK?!”

Hyunjin opens it to find Yeri in the middle of one of her high-pitched giggle fits. “I was gonna stick my hand out of the taillight and wave it around,” Yeri says. “Like in the Halle Berry 911 operator movie.”

“What is this. WHAT is this.” Hyunjin’s hands come to her head. “*Hyejoo what* do you think you’re doing?”

The four kids are standing near her in the cold at the side of the road, all silent. Chaewon clings to Hyejoo’s arm for warmth.

“Olivia,” Hyejoo corrects Hyunjin quietly.

“WHY WERE YOU IN MY CAR!”

“Well... Um... We,” Hyejoo tries. “...You said you were going to a party.”

Hyunjin narrows her eyes in disbelief. “So you and your four friends *broke into my car?! “*No response. “Great, now I have to drive you all back to Beverly Hills and I’m going to miss the countdown *and* Ryuji’s party-”

“Or you could just take us to the party,” Hyejoo interrupts.

Hyunjin scoffs as more cars whiz by them on the side of the road. “I’m not going to do that.” Hyunjin can’t possibly subject herself to being responsible for five younger children at Ryuji’s New Year’s Eve party.

“We have parental permission!” Choerry adds with an awkward smile.

“From *all* your parents?” Hyunjin asks.

“Who’s Ryuji?” Yeojin asks, catching Hyunjin off guard.

“Wha- What are you talking about?” Hyunjin’s nostrils flare.

“You said Ryuji’s party.” Yeojin says matter-of-factly. “Is that the girl that fucked you up?”

Yeri lifts her head out of the trunk. “You were really going through it in the car honey. Could hear that shit from the back.”

“That’s- That’s not important,” Hyunjin shakes her head, feeling embarrassed and exposed. “Who

are you people? I don't even *know* you!"

"I'm Choerry," the tallest, most-behaved girl says with a smile.

"Minaj comma Go Won," Chaewon says in her soft voice from under Hyejoo's jacket.

"*Minaj*?" Hyunjin asks.

"That is my family name, yes."

"Aphrodite," Yeri says with a straight face, while Hyejoo suppresses her own laughter.

"Like the Greek goddess?" Hyunjin raises an eyebrow.

"Not like the Greek goddess. I *am* the Greek goddess."

The last unknown girl, the shortest who gave them all in the way in the car, says "I'm Yeo..." Yeojin trails off.

Nobody finishes for her. Hyunjin's eyebrows crinkle. "Yeo... what?"

"Yeo MOM!" Yeojin says, while everyone but Hyunjin busts out into laughter.

"Choerry, Chae, Yeri, Yeojin," Hyejoo clarifies, pointing to her friends in order.

"What are you talking about Olivia, that's *not* my name," Yeri growls through grit teeth.

"Okay... kids," Hyunjin runs a hand over her face.

"Who were you singing about?" Chaewon asks again nosily.

"Yeah, tell us Hyunjin," Hyejoo supports.

Hyunjin suddenly doesn't want to make eye contact. "She's- They're- Oh God I am NOT talking about this with a bunch of eighth graders on the side on the road."

But the five of them look at her expectantly, and she feels pressured to give them something.

"People... They used to be my friends. But then... JUST- UGH just... You should never trust anyone. NO ONE!" Hyunjin preaches ominously.

"Not even yourself..." Hyejoo jokes, but Choerry slaps her arm.

Suddenly, Yeojin's phone buzzes to the beat of "Shots" by LMFAO and a photo of what appears to be Yeojin walking in on Haseul in a St. Jiho's bathroom stall as the caller ID.

"SHIT EVERYONE SHUT UP." Yeojin screams, looking at all of them with fear in her eyes.

When she thinks it's quiet enough, Yeojin slides the green button across the screen. "Good afternoon Mother."

The kids groan, and even Hyunjin cringes a little bit at Yeojin's greeting.

"*Hi sweetie! What are you up to? Always wondering about you crazy kids!*" Haseul's dorky older woman voice can be heard from the other end of the line.

Yeojin paces back and forth. "Haha hey. Haha you know we... we out here..." Yeojin struggles,

and Yeri facepalms from a distance.

“Oh! You went outside? I thought the party was inside!” Haseul says.

“NO. I’M HERE. INSIDE. I AM INSIDE A HOUSE.” Yeojin chokes out.

“...Well that’s good. Proud of you!” Haseul responds, not catching on to her daughter’s nervousness.

“Haha yeah well did you call for something or?” Yeojin scratches her head.

“I just wanted to call you now and say Happy New Year because Grandma was about to take out the 2000 piece puzzle and you know how intense this place can get! Especially all the Jo’s are together!” Haseul chuckles.

Intense was definitely not the word Yeojin thought of: it was the most boring part of every single one of her holidays.

“Okay, well-”

“Also I just miss you. It’s not the same without you here!” Haseul says endearingly.

Yejin blushes and looks back at her friends, who are smirking to see what her response will be.

“... I miss you too, okay I gotta go.” Yeojin whispers while turning away.

A truck honking suddenly approaches, blaring past the girls on the road.

“What was that?” Haseul questions.

“THE BUTLER. HAPPY NEW YEAR BYE LOVE YOU.” Yeojin hangs up the phone immediately. She walks back towards the other girls.

“You miss your mommy?” Hyejoo mocks.

Yejin hits her in response and then turns her attention to Hyunjin. “Okay ANYWAY, back to you and this party. Why are you going if you hate Ryujin?”

“Yeah, especially if she hurt you so bad?” Choerry asks innocently.

Hyunjin scoffs, hands shoved in her coat pockets. “I’m not really interested in partying. I just wanted to call the cops on them.”

“Oooh, revenge,” Yeri says. “You could make their night worse by being there.”

“That would make *my* night worse, I’ll be the one there all alone,” Hyunjin rejects, and the very thought of being in the presence of both Ryujin and Heejin for the first time in months makes her uncomfortable.

“No, you’ll have us,” Hyejoo asserts.

“NO? Plus, you’re all babies.” Hyunjin rejects again.

“Well, if you turn back now you’ll waste too much time.” Yeojin says. It’s not really true, but none of her friends object because they all just want to see what this damn party is all about.

“Isn’t there someone your age who can go with you?”

“Well,” Hyunjin cocks her head with wide eyes, and looks on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“They kind of ruined my social life, and now I don’t have any friends, HAHA-”

“Ooh Lord...” Chaewon judges a little too loudly.

“There’s gotta be someone out there who can help,” Choerry says with a sympathetic expression.

“Well,” Hyunjin shifts uncomfortably, not really wanting to resort to the last option going through her head, but she doesn’t really have a choice. “There is... Someone...”

“Oh my God, are these your siblings!?” Lia, cheerleading captain of Dalla High asks, playing with her ponytail looking down at the diverse middle school girls on the couch in front of her. None of them look remotely alike.

“No, they’re-” Hyunjin doesn’t even know what to call the five girls on her couch. “It’s complicated.”

“Hyunjin I know how foster care works.” Lia says nonsensically.

The eighth graders sitting on Hyunjin’s living room couch, listening to the vibrations of music coming from the neighboring house that they assume to be this “Ryujin”’s. They look up at the two high schoolers in front of them.

Lia’s wearing a gold sequin spaghetti strap crop top with a skirt to match. Her eyeshadow dazzles in perfect harmony with her outfit and the kids have to squint every time they look at her.

“You’re like, really pretty.” Yeri says, more as an observation rather than a compliment.

“Oh my God thank you. I love the fans!” Lia says smiling brightly at her.

“You have fans?” Yeri questions, curious now.

“Of course, I mean, I just know *so* many celebs on social media. It’s kind of crazy really, they mostly know me just because they think I’m pretty or whatever. But I’m using it to my advantage to gain popularity because I just know I’m going to get my big break soon. My voice? Five star range. I’m the next Ariana Grande. Even though there is no *real* next Ariana Grande because she’s an icon for the ages.” Lia finishes nonchalantly.

Yeri is stunned, staring at the older girl in a daze of her own. “I think I want to be you when I grow up.”

“Aw! Haha like a little me!” Lia’s smile falters. “Well not like a little me because no one could really be anything like me, more like a... like an off-brand but still great quality me. Actually-”

“OKAY I need to explain the PLAN!” Hyunjin shouts, cutting Lia off who just shrugs and nods in return.

Hyunjin had changed out of her sweats and into an offwhite long sleeve crop top with black jeans and boots, only a loose black string choker around her neck to accessorize.

Hyejoo has to admit, she didn’t know her babysitter could wear anything remotely revealing since most of her time is spent in a fursuit.

“Listen to me,” Hyunjin attempts at being strict, even though it is *so* out of her nature. “You are all going to *stay* on this couch while Lia and I are next door. We’re gonna check it out, and maybe burn the house down-”

“Oh my god I’ve always wanted to dabble in being an anti-christ!” Lia squeals.

“...You mean arsonist?” Choerry corrects while squinting, a little concerned.

“FOCUS!” Hyunjin shouts again, making every girl wince. “We’re gonna check it out, then I’ll come back to drive you guys home. Do *NOT* follow us into the party! Everyone got that?”

The five girls all nod.

Not even five minutes after Hyunjin and Lia step out of the house, the kids are out on the lawn, walking over to the loud residence next door.

High schoolers are lounging around the outside of the house, some of them smoking and others just talking. Laughter can be heard coming from inside as well as some of the Top 40 hits the group heard in the car.

Hyejoo gulps. This was a little more intimidating than she had originally expected. She looks over at her friends that are waiting for her.

“Are we going?” Chaewon asks.

“It looks like a lot.” Choerry says, beginning to play with the ends of her fuzzy sweater in nervousness.

“BOOO, stop being babies.” Yeojin says, but even she seems a little nervous.

“Um-” Hyejoo is cut off by Yeri strutting in front of them, not a stall in her step.

“Come on, we just have to pretend like we’re in high school. I mean it’s not like it’s hard.” She says flipping her hair. “Just act like you know everything but nothing at the same time.”

“What?” Hyejoo says, but Yeri is already making her way up the steps. Hyejoo looks at her friends and shrugs, following and the rest of the girls do the same.

When they enter the party, the girls have to stop and look around. Teenagers with red cups are scattered among the wooden interior of the household. The once muffled music is now hitting the middle schooler’s ears with clarity as the door closes behind them. The kids shuffle to the side of the house in order to take it all in.

Groups of unfamiliar teenagers are gathered together and participating in different conversations in opposite areas of the residence. One group of kids can be seen in the kitchen, chugging beers with an audience to impress. Another group are off in the living room dancing ridiculously. A few teenagers are making out with each other along the staircase to the second floor.

A girl who seems to be important is wearing ripped jeans and a silky blue button up is making her way down the steps, her hair freshly dyed pink with a drink in hand. Her other hand is interlocked with another girl sporting leather pants and a white sweater.

If Hyejoo’s not mistaken, she can recognize one of them as the waitress from Heart Shaker’s...

what was her name again? Heejin?

“They’re dying hair in the bathroom if anyone else wants to look this good!” The girl with pink hair screams, eliciting various whoops and hollers from the party-goers. She plops down on the steps, pulling Heejin down with her, giggling.

“Bye.” Yeri says, immediately running up the stairs, her blonde hair bouncing with every step. Irene had surprisingly let Yeri keep the color, but said her punishment was letting the roots grow out all the way no matter how bad it looked.

Suddenly, a new song comes on over the speakers.

“All you ladies pop your pussy like this.”

“FUUUUUUUUCK! FUCK! PERIOD!” Yeojin shouts along with every other teen in the room, and the extremely short eighth grader immediately meshes with a large group of dancing high schoolers. *“SHAKE YOUR BODY DON’T STOP DON’T MISS!”*

“And then there were three.” Hyejoo says, looking at the Choerry who looks like she’s about to pass out. “Are you good?” she asks her, a little concerned.

Choerry immediately tries to stop playing with her hands. “What? Yeah, I’m fine, yup yup.” She says, looking up at the other girl.

“Okay...”

“Why is everyone here kind of hot.” Chaewon says, causing Hyejoo to lose interest in Choerry completely.

“What?” Hyejoo says, her stomach dropping to the floor.

“Wow.” Chaewon says, her mouth basically hanging open as a group of attractive older girls walk past them. Hyejoo can roughly make out one of the girls asking her friend if she thinks she should run for prom queen this year.

Hyejoo is suddenly very self conscious in one of her many black hoodies. Chaewon is staring at them in awe and it’s as if Hyejoo isn’t even there. How was she supposed to compare to these teenagers? Even when she entered high school herself, she definitely didn’t see herself being prom queen anytime soon.

“I’m just saying there are some really good looking people here... high school seems fun.” She says, smiling as she looks through a crowd of people, unaware of Hyejoo’s sudden change in mood.

She freezes when she sees someone approaching behind Hyejoo.

“Oh shit guys hide, again!” Chaewon whispers, pulling Hyejoo and Choerry with her behind an occupied couch.

“Chae wha-”

“SHHH!” Chaewon says as all three girls peek out from behind the furniture.

Hyunjin and Lia walk over to where the girls were just standing. Well, more like Lia just drags Hyunjin over to where the girls were just standing.

“Come on grouchy! If you don’t want to tell me why you went M.I.A. for months, the least you can do is have fun! Do you want a drink?” Lia offers, Hyunjin sighing behind her.

“No, I don’t think that’d be a good ide-”

“HYUNJIN?!”

A loud, tiny girl screams from the kitchen, bounding all the way over to Hyunjin and engulfing her in a hug. The rest of the room turns to see what all the commotion is about, but simply brush it off. However, a few are whispering as they glance towards the girls hugging. Hyunjin has also seemed to catch the attention of the girls on the steps, who have suddenly stopped giggling to look over at Hyunjin.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe you’re here! I haven’t seen you in forever... Well I mean, I see you at school but I mean other than that.” The girl smiles, pulling back from Hyunjin and looking at Lia.

“Hi Bora.” Lia says, waving her fingers at the other girl. Bora keeps a smile on her face as she leans in close to Hyunjin.

“Why?” She whispers.

“It’s a long story.” Hyunjin whispers back.

“No fucking way!” A tall girl makes her way over to the group now, almost equally as loud as Bora. “Is that Hyunjin?”

“Siyeon, hey!” Hyunjin responds.

She walks over with two cups, holding one out to Bora who takes it and then wraps herself around the taller girl.

“I hate gay people.” Hyunjin mocks.

“WHAT?” Lia says, taken aback, a hand over her heart.

“No- it... it’s a joke.” Hyunjin explains. Lia lets out a relieved sigh.

“Thank god! I got scared for a second. I hate homophobes! Hashtag love wins!” She pokes Hyunjin’s cheek.

Siyeon leans over to whisper to Hyunjin. “Why?”

“It’s a long story.” Bora responds.

“Well,” Siyeon says, suddenly punching Hyunjin playfully in the arm. “We missed you. Do you have a drink yet?”

“I’ve been trying to get her to let loose, but I swear she’s like... a knot or something. Because like, she’s not letting loose.” Lia clarifies. “I’m going to get us drinks!”

Lia spins without another word and struts to the kitchen, saying hi to random people along the way. The girls reuniting watch her leave and chuckle a little bit.

“ANYWAY. I miss you guys too! The whole team...” Hyunjin responds, her heart filling a little from being appreciated. She honestly didn’t think anyone would care that she had left.

“Then why’d you quit?” Siyeon asks, and Bora nudges her sternly. Siyeon exaggerates the blow and shrugs, looking back at Hyunjin. “What? You were our *captain!* I mean you kinda quit everything, I just wanna know like... Why?”

Hyunjin opens her mouth, but doesn’t get a word out before she’s interrupted.

“Hi,” an all-too familiar voice greets from behind the former soccer star.

Hyunjin turns around slowly to see Heejin looking back at her, her pink haired girlfriend not too far behind with her arms crossed.

Everyone watching them suddenly goes silent, feeling as though if anyone were to breathe a bomb would be set off.

“What the fuck is going on?” Chae whispers from their place.

“This is getting interesting.” Hyejoo whispers back, remembering the extreme tension Heejin and Hyunjin had at the pizza parlor just from seeing each other.

Choerry feels herself get hot and start to sweat, uneasy from the sudden spike of tension in the unfamiliar house’s living room.

Hyunjin’s breath hitches as she takes Heejin in, but she quickly composes herself.

“Hi.” she responds dryly.

“Why are you here?” The pink-haired girl finally speaks.

Hyunjin smiles sarcastically. “Well *Ryujin* , you were telling everyone and their fucking mothers that this party was open invite at school, so *I* thought, why not accept it.”

Some of the guests snicker. Ryujin’s jaw locks, but she looks at Heejin who gives her a warning look. “I’m just... so glad that you’re here, Hyunjin.” Ryujin struggles to say flatly, absolutely no truth to her statement whatsoever.

Heejin looks back at Hyunjin, a hint of sadness in her eyes that Hyejoo observes but just can’t seem to figure out. Heejin opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out at first. “So... how-”

“Oh my god, *HENNESSY!* What is up girl!” Lia squeals coming back from the kitchen, two red cups with bendy straws in her hands.

Hyunjin has never been so relieved in her life as she gives Lia a look of gratitude. Lia, a little surprised that Hyunjin’s not rolling her eyes at her for once, winks and hands her one of the cups.

“Lia. Always a pleasure.” Heejin responds coldly.

“I know right?” Lia says, smiling as she bites her bendy straw.

Lia uses her free arm to link herself with Hyunjin, scooting in close. Hyejoo didn’t even need to be close to see Heejin’s eye twitch.

A seductive latin beat comes through the crowd’s small but powerful speakers.

“*Solo, solito en la habitación... Busca, que busca de mi calor,*”

“OH MY GOD I LOVE THIS SONG!” Lia shrieks excitedly, getting way too excited to hear “Sin

Pijama” by Becky G.

Heejin, Ryujin and Hyunjin all look at the girl in confusion. The song was clearly being sung in Spanish, yet Lia was singing every word perfectly. “Do you take Spanish or something?” Hyunjin asks, impressed with Lia’s pronunciation.

“No, but Becky G is my girl! We’re mutuals on Instagram!” Lia responds. “Come on, let’s dance!”

Lia takes Hyunjin’s hand and drags her to the living room, leaving Ryujin and Heejin behind to just watch them.

The rest of the crowd slowly drift back to their own conversation. Bora and Siyeon, sipping from their solo cups, shrug and head over to the dance floor themselves.

Heejin watches as Lia dances on Hyunjin to the slow beat, a fire in her eyes with every second passing. Ryujin’s eyes shift between Heejin and the girls dancing, seemingly getting more irritated as she does. Hyejoo and Chaewon mouths drop open when they see Ryujin reach for Heejin’s arm.

“You know what?” Ryujin says, a little too aggressively for one talking to their girlfriend. “I can dance too.”

Ryujin takes Heejin to the living room where they disappear among the crowd.

“Jesus, I didn’t know high school parties would be this dramatic.” Hyejoo says, finally being able to talk at a normal volume.

“Are you kidding!?” Chaewon says, a smile on her face that makes Hyejoo’s heart skip a beat. “I never want to leave,” she breathes out in awe.

Hyejoo looks over to Chaewon who is extremely entertained, and is just glad her reckless decision may just have paid off.

A group of exotic fire dancers make a cheerleading pyramid in the middle of the Ha mansion ballroom and proceed to twirl giant balls of flame around.

“Why... Why did we come here,” Jinsol whispers to her wife at her side, eyes trained on the unusual sight.

“I don’t really know anymore,” Jungeun answers with her eyes aglow, looking in unexpected fascination.

“How are they even doing that?” Jinsol asks. Jungeun never answers, and Jinsol turns to her side to see the shorter woman’s eyes on her phone. “Everything okay?”

“Choerry isn’t responding to my texts,” Jungeun mutters in the warm flashing light of the fire show and that of her phone. “I might just go up there.”

“Oh don’t, she left with Hyejoo and them. I did tell her to answer the phone though, that’s weird.”

Jungeun turns her neck towards Jinsol so slowly, it’s almost cinematic. “*What?*”

“She left with- oh no, you’re... mad...” Jinsol starts, panic rising as Jungeun continues to look at

her like she just strangled a baby.

“Left where?” The CFO is no longer whispering.

“She said they were going with Hyejoo’s babysitter, her and all of them, to a high school party or something-”

“A *WHAT?!?*” Jungeun shrieks. “*Jinsol!*” she whispers aggressively. “You let Choerry go to a *high school party!?!?*”

Jinsol feels as though she should realize her error by now, but she... doesn’t? “Wh- What’s the problem, she’s with the other girls...?”

“What’s the *problem?!?*” Jungeun hisses, drawing a bit of attention from the guests around her. “You let our daughter go to a high school party? On *New Year’s Eve?*”

Jinsol scoffs a little, she can’t help but disagree. “Jungeun she’s not a baby anymore...” She shrugs, which only makes her wife narrow her eyes in disbelief. “She has four other friends and she’s very respon-”

“And who was driving?”

“Well, Hyejoo’s babysitter-”

Jungeun is appalled. “The high school girl? *Jesus!* Does she even have her driver’s license to be chaperoning kids around?!?”

“...Well I assume so since she’s a babysitter-”

“That is *not the point Jinsol!*”

The married couple is now bickering in the corner of the central ballroom mid-fire show.

“Do you even know how dangerous those parties can be these days?” Jungeun interrogates aggressively. “Do you even know *where* they are?”

“I think you just need to relax a bit,” Jinsol laughs lightly instead of admitting that no, she has no idea where their child went. She hates to have to tell her wife to calm down, but the questioning was letting bad thoughts of her own come to surface. “They’re going to be fine.”

“Jinsol,” Jungeun pauses to huff and looks up at her, trying her absolute best not to call her wife an idiot for this. “I know you aren’t used to being the one to decide if she goes out or not. But this is *not* okay!”

“For letting her go have fun with a group of friends? Jungeun, parents let their kids do things like this all the time!”

“I’m sorry but I really don’t think you’re in any place to be correcting my parenting,” Jungeun retorts swiftly.

Jinsol is stunned at the low blow for a second, opening her mouth to say things but no noise comes out because, well, Jungeun’s not wrong. “...I’m just saying not all of them are as uptight as you...!” Jinsol finishes weakly, as if she lost all her courage to finish the sentence halfway through.

Jungeun suddenly recoils. It’s as if the words from Jinsol’s mouth were delivered with physical force. She doesn’t respond, and just looks offended more than anything.

Jinsol immediately shuts her mouth and softens seeing the look on her wife's face, seeing she's hit a sore spot. She cringes, like she's just stepped in something sticky. But before she can say anything-

"I can't talk to you right now," Jungeun snaps emotionlessly.

Jinsol's head tilts in regret. "Wait, Jungeun-"

But her wife turns around and storms off into the wealthy crowd, disappearing from sight.

Sooyoung feels the vibrations of her wife's army general voice before she hears it. The CEO peeks her head into their very busy private kitchen, where chefs are still assembling food output.

Jiwoo is standing in the center, a bit flustered in the clinical white light but earth-shatteringly gorgeous nevertheless. She appears to be handling an instance of classic male incompetence. Sooyoung just stares at her as she waits for her to finish, and discovers that she may have found yet another new turn-on.

Heels clicking beneath her, the sophisticated woman heads over to her wife's side.

"WHAT!" Jiwoo barks out of stress looking down at perfectly baked cupcakes, not realizing the love of her life is next to her and not another irritating chef.

Sooyoung just smirks amusedly. "Hi," she giggles melodically.

"O-Oh," Jiwoo chirps wide-eyed and stunned with minor embarrassment. "I'm sorry honey! I'm just IRRITATED," the celebrity is suddenly shouting, "THAT SOME PEOPLE DON'T KNOW HOW TO ICE CUPCAKES CORRECTLY!"

"God you're so hot," Sooyoung admires.

"Oh yeah?" Jiwoo turns to her with a wink and crinkles her nose, to which Sooyoung nods with a closed-mouth giggle while bringing their lips together for a few kisses.

"Taste it," Jiwoo says, bringing up a red velvet cupcake to her wife's mouth to feed her. (This is the only time Sooyoung Ha will ever eat carbs. She loves her wife's cakes, in more ways than one!)

Jiwoo looks up triumphantly at her wife's eyes almost rolling back at the moistness. "That's so good," Sooyoung virtually moans.

"Of course it is," Jiwoo chirps. "Can you get Hyejoo for me honey? I need her tiny little fingers to help me with the decor."

Of course. Hyejoo.

Their child that Sooyoung definitely had *not* been checking up on.

"Sure," Sooyoung nods, skillfully concealing her inner panic.

“Thank you,” Jiwoo leans close to the cupcakes in front of her, appreciating the beauty of her babies. “You’ve been checking up on her like I asked you to right?”

“...Yes,” Sooyoung lies flatly.

“Good.” Jiwoo sighs in relief, turning one on its base. “Okay, quickly! I need her now,” she shoos her wife away.

Had Sooyoung been checking up on her like she was asked to? No. But what could possibly be the problem? Hyejoo stays in her room all the time, why would tonight be any different?

So, apparently tonight was different.

Hyejoo is not in her room. Or any of the rooms on the East Wing, much to Sooyoung’s horror.

The mother had searched every single one, each more frantically than the last. There was no sign of her daughter’s four friends either. On top of that, Hyejoo wasn’t answering her phone at all.

Is it awful that Sooyoung is more concerned with what Jiwoo might say to her than their child’s current safety? Yes, and it’s even worse that Sooyoung kind of knows it.

So when she returns back to the kitchen empty-handed, well-

“Great, where is she,” Jiwoo says, still focusing on her confections in front of her.

“She’s... Um...” Sooyoung starts with a shaky voice. “Um...”

She can’t even finish, and Jiwoo turns her head to look away from her cakes and straight into Sooyoung’s eyes.

“SHE’S DEAD?!” Jiwoo panics ridiculously.

“No! No! I-I’m gonna find her, I just need more time.” Sooyoung responds.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU CAN’T FIND HER?!” Jiwoo shouts incredulously, and Sooyoung doesn’t find Jiwoo’s army voice hot anymore.

“Honey, honey,” Sooyoung says nervously. “I’m gonna find her okay?”

“You *lost* her?!? I thought you said you checked up on her on the hour! That should have been less than ten minutes ago!”

“Well... I...”

Jiwoo waits with flared nostrils for Sooyoung to finish her sentence, but she never does.

“So you *lied* to me.” Jiwoo says with her jaw locked, her demeanor now stone cold.

Sooyoung tuts dismissively. “Jiwoo... Don’t say it like that-”

“How should I say it then?” Jiwoo challenges with a low, very betrayed voice.

Sooyoung just shakes her head and changes the subject to immediately shed the malfeasance off

her skin. "Listen, her friends weren't there either, so I'm sure they're together."

"Oh my God, what if something happened to her," Jiwoo gasps and fights the possibility with tears springing to her eyes.

"No, no no, Jiwooming, hey," Sooyoung calms protectively, her hands coming to rub Jiwoo's forearms. "They have to be somewhere in this big house okay? I'm going to go get her."

Jiwoo looks completely and utterly overwhelmed. "Well GO! Get out of here and fix this!" she cries, and Sooyoung runs in her heels out of their private kitchen.

Everyone tries to hide it, but the uneasiness being felt just by having Heejin, Hyunjin, and Ryujin in the same room for the first time in months was just undeniable.

Hyunjin and Lia dance together, relatively tame for the song playing as the clock on the wall inches toward midnight. Hyunjin just wanted to forget about the events of the night at this point and Lia was happy to oblige.

When Hyunjin spots Ryujin and Heejin making their way to the floor though, Hyunjin becomes visibly irritated. The girls begin to dance together and Hyunjin is not following the beat anymore, but instead trying her best not to stare at the girls who had moved into her eyesight. Attempting to ignore them, the girl looks the complete opposite way, losing Lia from her sight in the process.

Lia turns around curious as to why the girl has looked away from her, and sees Ryujin and Heejin dancing very closely. Lia rolls her eyes at the couple.

If Lia is being honest, she really couldn't care less about whatever drama they had going on. Yes, Lia had acquired a little crush on Hyunjin, but it had always been clear who Hyunjin had eyes for. And Lia was never anyone's second choice.

Still, the cheerleader can't help but feel a little skip in her heart for the former soccer captain. And truthfully speaking, she likes having her fun with Hyunjin regardless of where it led to. Hyunjin is cute, and Lia is only human. And a lesbian. So she's decided to make the most of the night, because she figures well, it's what they both deserved.

However, Ryujin and her little girlfriend Horsefly were starting to come in between them and their fun. So Lia decides then and there to amp up the intensity.

Lia grabs Hyunjin's face to turn it back towards her own.

"Fuck them!" Lia says playfully, bringing her face closer so Hyunjin can hear her over the noisy music. "Follow my lead," she says, as "Promiscuous" by Nelly Furtado comes starts.

Hyunjin raises an eyebrow, curious. She nods slowly and Lia smiles.

Lia takes Hyunjin's hand in hers. She lifts it up high to spin underneath it and then backs up slightly so that they are front to back. Lia looks back to make sure Hyunjin's okay only to see her blushing in response. Lia smirks as she places Hyunjin's hands on her waist. She feels Hyunjin tense up a little.

Lia turns to look at Hyunjin. "What, are you scared?"

Hyunjin rolls her eyes at the challenge. *Her? Scared?*

"I just feel like everyone's looking at us." Hyunjin replies. Paranoid as she might be, she definitely wasn't wrong. Lia only smiles at her worry.

"And they should be! We're hot! *You're hot!*" Lia says, turning back around. "Just have fun!"

Hyunjin can't help but smile at the compliment. She looks down at herself and there really was no denying it. She looks *good*.

Hyunjin immediately relaxes, swaying comfortably with Lia as the music goes on. Hyunjin would never admit it, but they're moving in perfect sync.

"I am hot huh?" Hyunjin jokes, running a hand through her own hair tussling it a little bit.

Lia laughs, making Hyunjin giggle too. Lia just keeps moving to the rhythm, even when she notices a certain someone burning holes into her head.

Heejin is furious as she looks over Ryuji's shoulder. She's trying her best to hide it, but it's more than obvious that the girl is pissed.

Lia, comfortable in Hyunjin's arms, winks smugly at Heejin.

Meanwhile, Hyejoo, Chaewon, and Choerry watch in awe from a couch that was pushed out of the way as the drama unfolds in front of them.

Ryuji had noticed Heejin looking at Hyejoo's babysitter and her date. The pink haired girl was now trying to show off with Heejin and *very* promiscuous dancing.

Heejin complies and begins dancing with her pink-haired girlfriend, but Hyejoo was pretty sure it was only to make Hyunjin as jealous as Hyunjin was making her.

Neither of them were getting the attention they wanted though, as Hyunjin and Lia continued to giggle together.

"They are insane." Hyejoo comments.

"WOW." Suddenly Yeojin plops down next to them on the sofa. Her eyes are barely visible through the zeroes in the new year's sunglasses she's sporting, an orange hat on her head to match. "Hyejoo, I had doubts at first, but your babysitter? She's kind of hot. And you know I'm not into women under thirty..." Yeojin takes a sip from a red cup that she's come into the possession of.

"Are you *drinking?*" Choerry whispers, her eyes bulging as she looks at the cup.

"Yeah of course I *drink* Choerry... I'm a *HIGH SCHOOLER*. *HA! NEW YEARS WOO!*" Yeojin says loudly as she looks around.

Yeojin notices Choerry's immediate good-girl terror and moves in closer in order to whisper.

"Relax. It's just a Sprite I found in the fridge. Not gonna lie it's fucking spicy though. It's corroding the lining of my throat." The tiny girl takes another sip. "Worse than your boyfriend's B.O.," she laments, with a tilt of her can.

Choerry thinks for a second. She was undoubtedly feeling anxious, especially with the growing tension of high school drama in front of her. Maybe Sprite *would* ease her nausea for a little while.

"Okay but Yeojin's right... Hyunjin looks so good." Chaewon says, continuing to stare at the high schoolers dancing.

“Seriously?” Hyejoo says, her face drenched in disbelief.

“You said you got that in the fridge?” Choerry asks Yeojin, who takes another sip and then coughs like she’s just inhaled ground-up ghost pepper from the Sprite’s apparent acidity.

“Yeah, bottom drawer.” Yeojin replies.

“I’ll be right back guys,” Choerry says softly, excusing herself from the couch as her friends nod in acknowledgement.

“Really? You think *she’s* hot?” Choerry can hear Hyejoo interrogate Chaewon as she walks towards the kitchen. She giggles a little at Hyejoo’s increasing concern.

The massive amount of teenagers in the kitchen is enough to put the middle school president over the edge. Taking a deep breath, Choerry weaves her way through kids in order to get to the fridge.

She’s about to open the door when a boy approaches her and puts his hand on the handle.

“Hey.” An unfamiliar, much older high school boy says, looking Choerry up and down. He’s wearing a football jersey, and jeans, patchy scruff around his chin. “I haven’t seen you around before.”

Choerry stiffens. “I’m not... I don’t go to your school.” She says trying not to blow her friends’ cover, but feeling even more uneasy than before.

“Oh, I know. I would’ve definitely noticed you.” He says, a smirk growing on his face.

“That’s nice...” Choerry says, trying her best to smile despite the uncomfortable situation.

The unwanted boy moves even closer to her. “Do you want to go somewhere more private?”

Choerry immediately takes a few steps back. “I-I have a boyfriend, sorry.”

The boy still advances. “I don’t see him...” He tries to lean in but a very terrified Choerry suddenly pushes the large boy out of the way, bolting out of the kitchen.

“OH COME ON!” he shouts at her back.

Yejin is still struggling to finish her Sprite when she notices Choerry sprinting up the Ryujin’s stairs in a hurry.

The student body president is shielding her face, and definitely had no one accompanying her, which Yeojin thought was unusual.

Actually, Choerry had been acting kind of weird ever since they had left the Ha residence. Yeojin had just thought Choerry was being a prude about going to a party, but now she was starting to have some concerns.

The highschoolers were still dancing in front of them, but the tension had eased off a bit. An upbeat song was playing and Hyunjin and Lia were now accompanied by Sua and Siyeon, dancing and singing at the top of their lungs.

Ryujin and Heejin were off to the side, watching both bitter and sad. Yeojin figured she could spare a few seconds without missing anything.

“Um, I’ll be back.” Yeojin says to Hyejoo and Chaewon. Hyejoo waves her off.

“You really think Hyunjin is hot?” Hyejoo asks Chaewon for the *millionth* time now in a sheepish, timid tone, and Yeojin rolls her eyes as she gets up off the couch. *If Olivia thinks for one second she was being subtle...*

Yejin makes her way up the stairs, trying not to fall over teenagers on the way. She finally makes it to the second floor, looking down a poorly lit hallway smelling of spilled alcohol. There were a few teenagers hanging around, but not many. She starts walking down, the floor creaking beneath her as she looks for any sign of her friend.

“Hey freshman! Can I at least get the hair dye!” A teenager wearing gloves stained pink screams from outside of the bathroom door.

Yejin walks over to her, taking off her sunglasses and hat. “Hey barbershop, who’s in there?”

The older girl sighs. “First of all, my name is *Minji* and second of all, I don’t know, some little freshman with pink hair and a purple sweater crying.”

Choerry? Crying? Yeojin starts to feel worried.

“Minji! Someone’s calling for you downstairs!”

Minji scoffs and appears to be very irritated. “What? Who? Is it Yoohyeon...! Because if it is?! I don’t care I told her if she talked to Handong again I-”

“Yoohyeon, Handong, Ryujin, Heejin, *Jesus Christ*, who don’t you high schoolers have drama with? Go downstairs!” Yeojin says.

Minji scoffs, and heads downstairs without another word.

Yejin approaches the door and raps on the thin wooden door. “Hey Choerry?”

She hears a snuffle, but other than that, complete silence. Yeojin tries to wriggle the door handle a little, but it’s locked from the inside. Yeojin sighs.

“Choerry it’s just me...” She says, concerned. “...Ya girl...”

She hears a familiar little laugh through snuffles behind the thin door.

“Are you okay?” No answer. Yeojin leans her head against the door. “Choerry, open up, I’m worried or whatever,” the class clown says.

A few seconds pass and Yeojin starts to think Choerry is never going to open up. But then, the bathroom door unlocks and the knob turns slowly. Yeojin peeks in slowly to find Choerry with her back against the wall, a mild amount of tears on her face even though she’s trying to wipe their traces away.

“Oh thank God I thought you flushed yourself down the toilet or shit yourself or something.” Yeojin says, coming in fully to join Choerry in the small bathroom and closes the door behind her. She stops. “Wait you didn’t shit yourself did you?”

Choerry allows a laugh to break through again. “No.”

Yejin sits down next to her. “Then what’s wrong?”

Choerry just shakes her head, not really prepared to have this conversation with any of her friends.

“I know something’s been up Barney. Ever since you got in Hyunjin’s car.” Yeojin bites the inside of her cheek. “You’re like... On edge or something.”

The president just looks down, her hands finding each other once again as they had been all night.

Choerry takes a deep breath. “Can you keep a secret?”

“...Sure?” Yeojin looks up at the taller girl with a confused expression.

The moment between them is unusually tender, under the hum of the yellow bathroom light.

There’s something about it, considering that the two have really only been alone together maybe twice in their lifetime. And the last time they were was when Choerry caught Yeojin hallway swimming after school on her way to a student council meeting.

Choerry plays with the thread on her skirt. “Remember that day...” the pink-haired eighth grader winces at the memory. “In the gym?”

How could Yeojin forget? “...Yeah?”

“Well after that... I had, like, um... An... attack.” Choerry says staring into the crevices of Ryujin’s bathroom sink, her kind eyes not wanting to meet Yeojin’s.

“You were... a victim of an attack...?” Yeojin tilts her head a little with squinted eyes, a little afraid for Choerry to be honest.

“Yes, well- No, I was, like, attacked-”

“Oh wow like by a bear or something...?” Yeojin asks, not understanding.

Choerry closes her eyes in frustration. There’s really no way to get this across without outright saying it.

“An anxiety attack,” she clarifies quietly. “I have anxiety.” The phrase was still unacquainted with the eighth grade girl, laced with hesitation as it passed through her lips.

“...Oh.”

“Oh,” Choerry repeats, looking down at her shoes.

“...Like... Getting nervous? Isn’t that the same thing?” Yeojin questions very hesitantly, trying her best not to come off the wrong way but she genuinely doesn’t know.

“No... like,” Choerry struggles. “My moms- Um... Sometimes I, like, I have to go talk to someone... And I-”

“Ohhhhh,” Yeojin breathes suddenly with a slow head nod, and to Choerry’s surprise the deep-voiced girl is much less judgemental about this than she is about literally anything else on the planet.

“Like... one thing makes me really nervous. And then I... I like never stop being nervous. And... It doesn’t go away even if everything around me is fine. Sometimes, I feel it when nothing is even happening. But when I feel it, e-everything around me is too much, and then it gets worse... And my stomach hurts *so bad*.” Choerry opens up. “Then I cry even though I don’t even want to... I’m

not even sad, it's just, like, happens."

Yeojin looks at her friend, shifting a little awkwardly but trying her best to show her concern. Choerry snuffles again and puts her used tissues in the tiny trash bin.

Yeojin doesn't say anything, her expression unreadable, so Choerry lets out a shaky breath to continue explaining herself. "So when we came to a place where we weren't supposed to be, without knowing where we were going, or how we're even getting home... I... A-And then Hyejoo's babysitter started talking to that one girl with the pink hair and I felt like they were going to fight or something. Plus my stomach was hurting already so I went to get a Sprite from the fridge and this boy... I told him I had a boyfriend but he still tried to... Like, kiss me." she shivers a little.

Yeojin puts a hand on Choerry's arm awkwardly in a sincere attempt at comfort. She's silent for a moment. Then, with a steely expression - "Do you want me to castrate him?"

"No," Choerry sighs. "I really just want to go home."

Yeojin nods immediately. "Okay. Then we can go home."

Choerry's eyes widen. "What? No, no you're having fun, I'll just go home by myself it's okay."

"No, it's not *that* fun." Yeojin lies, placing the party hat and sunglasses at her sides. "Plus your mom is the only one who knows we're at a party. You can call her to come get us while we find the others. Come on."

Yeojin extends a hand to Choerry, but the girl on the wall hesitates.

"Actually, can I just stay up here? I'm- I'm afraid of seeing the guy again..." Choerry trails off.

Yeojin nods again. "Oh yeah, I'm stupid. ...Just wait here for me then?" the principal's daughter says, looking up at the girl. "Will you be okay?"

"Yeah." Choerry says, taking another deep breath. "I'll call my mom while you go down there."

Yeojin shakes her head and is about to open the door when Choerry grabs her arm.

"Wait- Yeojin?"

The short girl turns around. "Yeah?"

"Thank you," Choerry says in a small voice, looking at her friend. "Thank you so much for this," she repeats, feeling more relieved than she has all night. "...If you could keep it all a secret-"

Yeojin smiles awkwardly. "I said I could keep a secret, couldn't I?"

Choerry gives Yeojin an endearing smile as her eyes light up in the process. "You're a really good friend."

"Ewww, shut the FUCK up," Yeojin says in an extra-deep voice as she returns back to her normal self (or perhaps, the one she lets others see), and Choerry giggles. "I'll be right back."

Saying no more, Yeojin exits the bathroom, and makes her way back downstairs to gather the rest of the girls.

Jinsol has absolutely no idea where her wife is.

The CEO had tried to chase after her when she initially had walked away, but the amount of people in the regal ballroom was overwhelming. She had elected to just give Jungeun some space for a bit, but now, an hour or two had passed and Jinsol still had not seen her again.

And now, as she walks through the party ballroom, Jinsol is surrounded by so many dancing bodies that she didn't even know which way the music was coming from.

Jinsol decides to step a little bit out from the crowd, nearing the edge of the dancefloor when she hears the familiar voice of her wife scream behind her.

“OH MY GOD! IT'S MY WIFE, EVERYBODY!”

Jinsol turns around, her eyes wide after immediately recognizing that voice.

Jungeun, a little disheveled, is pointing at Jinsol very aggressively to a total stranger. She has a very large and curvy drink glass in hand, and is significantly louder than usual.

The crowd around her cheers, and the drunken CFO makes her way over to Jinsol, immediately flinging her arms around her when she gets close. She spills a little bit of her drink in the process, sending Jinsol stumbling back a little.

“JINSOL care me.” Jungeun slurs, cuddling into her wife's chest.

“*What??*” Jinsol questions, not sure what is going on.

Jungeun steps back a little, then grabs a handful of Jinsol's blonde hair.

“*CRONCH*. Hahahaha,” Jungeun is now cackling like a witch for no good reason with her wife's blonde hair in her hands. “Crunch crunch crunch so CRUNCHY!”

“Stop that!” Jinsol whines at the fried sound effects and Jungeun releases her hair, giggling maniacally.

“What? Oh, am I TOO loose now? Well guess WHAT! There's no re-tightening this fishing pole wire! Because like they say! Once you crumble the paper that's just the way it happens!” Jungeun says, chugging the rest of her drink to set her glass on a passing waiter's tray, clearly unaware that her last sentence barely qualified as English.

Jinsol had witnessed her wife drunk before, many, many times. But the way Jungeun was acting now was on a completely different level. It was as if Jinsol had unlocked a new character by calling Jungeun uptight.

Jungeun suddenly grabs Jinsol's ass, and Jinsol squeaks loudly making many people glance over at them. “*Honey what are you doing!*” Jinsol exclaims, beet red from embarrassment.

Out of nowhere, Jungeun turns around and attempts to grind her flat ass on Jinsol completely off beat to the booming music blasting through the multicolored ballroom. Jinsol has no idea what's happening. The CFO spins back around to face her wife, bringing their bodies as close as she possibly can while still dancing to the beat, letting her hands caress her wife's exposed back.

Jinsol might have been turned on if the whole reason Jungeun was being like this wasn't because she had hurt her feelings.

“Baby,” Jinsol gets closer so that her wife can hear her over the loud noise. “I’m so sorry for calling you uptight.” she says, reaching to take Jungeun’s hands in her own. “I didn’t mean that, that was hurtful.”

Jungeun looks at her seriously for the first time since she found her. She’s about to respond until her phone rings. She gasps dramatically at Choerry’s caller ID.

“OUR FETUS IS CALLING!” Jungeun holds her iPhone up and hits the speaker button. “Hello my little Egg McMuffin!” she coos in a customer service voice. “Can I take your order?”

“*What?*” Choerry questions from the other end of the line.

Jungeun starts laughing loudly at her own nonsensical drunken humor.

“*Um... Mom?*”

“Yes this is your MOM! Don’t ever forget that, oh my God I love you so much.” Jungeun lifts a hand to cover her suddenly teary eyes, while Jinsol watches in disbelief. “You are SO tiny... My baby... I can’t believe your mother said it was OKAY to go to a high school party! AAAAAAH!” Jungeun screams like a pterodactyl. “But then again... YOU AREN’T A BABY! IT’S JUST HARD BECAUSE YOU ARE MY BABY?! AND YOU KNOW! I SHOULDN’T HAVE GOTTEN SO MAD AT MOM!”

Jungeun was now looking at Jinsol, obviously trying to explain herself to her wife through this conversation. Jinsol nods understandingly with a smile, squeezing Jungeun’s free hand.

“*Mommy can you come pick me up? I don’t want to be here anymore.*” Choerry asks, evidently anxious.

“Choerry?” Jinsol speaks up protectively now. “It’s me... Is everything okay?”

It’s silent for a second. “*Yeah I just want you to come get me please,*” Choerry says hurriedly.

Jinsol looks at her wife who clearly is in no condition to drive. They could go together, but Jinsol knows that Jungeun gets *extremely* carsick when she’s drunk... But it’s not like she was going to leave their child at that party alone either.

“DON’T WORRY SWEETIE. I MAY BE A LITTLE BIT TIPSY. BUT I WILL HAVE SOMEONE PICK YOU UP, OKAY. I WILL FIND YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE MY EGG.” Jungeun shrieks into the microphone.

“Choerry we will find a way to get you, do you know the address of the house you’re at?” Jinsol asks.

“*Okay my phone’s gonna die but we’re at Hyejoo’s babysitter’s friend’s house it’s-*” But before Choerry can finish her sentence, the line cuts.

“Shit,” Jinsol curses very worriedly, looking at her wife. “How are we going to find her?”

“WELL. We could-” The music cuts to silence as the current song ends. And then-

“*It’s Britney bitch,*”

Suddenly, Jungeun’s eyes roll to the back of her head.

“*I see you. And I just want to dance with you.*”

Jungeun separates herself a little from Jinsol, flinging her arms everywhere, mumbling the words to “Gimme More” by the one and only Britney Spears.

“MmMmNnnnAAn NANA la la LIGHTS DOOOOOWN!” Jungeun is basically screeching into the ballroom.

Meanwhile, Sooyoung Ha has just entered their vicinity, searching frantically for her missing daughter. She looks around and sees no sign of her, but she does see Jungeun Kim on the dance floor causing a scene. Jinsol’s bright blonde head isn’t too far away. Sooyoung groans, not wanting to approach them - but she was feeling a little desperate. Maybe the Kims would have some idea as to where her kid was, since Choerry was missing from the east wing as well...

Sooyoung rolls her eyes before walking over to the woman, heels clicking the floor loudly the entire way.

“Excuse me.” Sooyoung barks, startling Jinsol a little bit.

“Jesus Christ. What do you want?” Jinsol asks, turning her attention from her wife.

“Have you seen my daughter? She’s not in her room along with all her little friends, so I figured you might-” Sooyoung is distracted by Jungeun, a grown woman, slut-dropping to the floor. “Are you going to shut that down?” Sooyoung asks as a clearly intoxicated Jungeun attempts to twerk on her wife.

Jinsol looks over but turns back to Sooyoung with her arms crossed. “She’s a grown woman, I don’t control her!”

Sooyoung takes a deep breath. “Whatever, do you know where my kid is or not?”

“They all went to some high school party,” Jinsol answers.

“THEY LEFT THE HOUSE?!” The other CEO freaks, her eyes bugging out of her head.

“You didn’t know your child wasn’t in the house?” Jinsol smirks a little, clearly judging Sooyoung’s parenting.

“I-”

“YOU GO PARTY GIRL!” Jiwoo yells as she suddenly comes into view, throwing stray \$100 bills at Jungeun, who is only enabled by her bestfriend’s actions. “Oh my god! Why aren’t you like this everyday?”

“I LOVE YOU!” Jungeun screams drunkenly.

“I LOVE *YOU*!” Jiwoo responds with similar fervor. She smiles wide until she sees her wife standing off to the side in her peripheral.

Jiwoo walks over to Jinsol and Sooyoung with a pointed look. “Well, did you find our child?”

Sooyoung is ghost white. “Um... well... listen-”

“She went to a high school party.” Jinsol supplies, and Sooyoung immediately steps on the other CEO’s heel with hers. Jinsol holds in a yelp.

“SHE LEFT OUR HOUSE!?” Jiwoo screeches, terror filling her face.

“Baby it’s fine-” Sooyoung tries to touch Jiwoo’s arm, but shorter woman recoils.

“It is *NOT* fine! Our daughter ran away to a party and we have no idea where she is! It’s not like we can get all these strangers out of our house to go search for her either!” Jiwoo’s nostrils are flaring.

Jinsol has never seen the woman this angry before... Or angry in general... They don’t exactly show the angry side of Chuu on TV...

“Well, Choerry called and asked us to come get them. They said they were at Hyejoo’s babysitter’s friend’s house?” Jinsol offers, trying to get the normally Positive Polly to stop from exploding.

“See! We know Hyunjin’s address!” Sooyoung tries to sound positive.

“She said Hyunjin’s FRIEND’s house. How are we supposed to find them now?” Jiwoo says, clearly very stressed.

Silence.

“HI IRENE!” Jungeun yells suddenly, scaring the adults as she has stopped dancing and is now holding up her phone on FaceTime to the group.

“Jungeun Kim?” Irene Kang asks, confused as to why a disheveled St. Jihyo’s parent she’s spoken to about once is FaceTiming her in the middle of the night. “What is the matter with you?”

“WHAT? IT’S NEW YEARS EVE!” Jungeun screams loudly. “Anyway, Yeojin, Yeri, Hyejoo, Chaewon and Choerry snuck out of the house to go to a high school party and we need someone to go get them. Actually Choerry didn’t sneak out she asked us, God, our sweet little angel, you HAVE to find her!”

“*EXCUSE ME?!* ” Irene responds, her face extremely close to the camera now. It appears that her nose is pressed up against the screen. “A HIGH SCHOOL PARTY?!”

“YES! THAT’S WHAT I SAID!” Jungeun responds in a giggling fit. “But the problem is, we um don’t know wh-!”

“Not to worry.” Irene speaks calmly. “I have Yeri microchipped in case this ever occurred.”

“You what?” Sooyoung and Jinsol say at the same time. They look at each other in disgust, then back at Irene.

“I’ve eaten one of those before! My stomach beeped for a week!” Jiwoo says, almost as if she was bragging.

“Yeah!” Seulgi Kang says, suddenly appearing on the screen. “I have the GPS to it locked in a safe so Irene won’t track her every move. The password is something she would never guess.”

Seulgi walks over to the safe, covers the passcode keyboard with one hand and types in the word **CHEESE**. The safe opens and she pulls out a GPS, walking back over towards her wife and showing the device to the camera.

“We can go get them!” Seulgi smiles, but it fades when she looks down at herself. “Aww, but I did just change into my pajamas...”

“Don’t worry Jungeun.” Irene declares like a secret agent on a mission.

“We will be on our way to retrieve them within ten minutes.”

“IRENE DA-” Jungeun burps. “Oh God... IRENE DA BEST!”

“Thank you so, so much Irene!” Jiwoo sends a big air kiss to the phone with both hands.

“We’ll drop off the kids soon. I’ll be in contact.” Irene says.

“Can I just wear my paj-” Irene hangs up before Seulgi can finish her sentence, leaving the adults standing around each other.

“Well. As much as I’d like to hangout with you!” Jiwoo says looking at Jungeun, who sends her finger guns in return. “I have to go cry in my child’s room! Hahaha happy Chuu Year everyone!”

With that, Jiwoo spins on her heel, walking straight out of the party. Sooyoung follows close behind, nearly tripping over herself.

“Well that was... interesting.” Jinsol says, looking at her wife, who was still moving to the beat.

“Hey.” Jinsol pulls her wife over to her by the waist gently. “I really am sorry I called you uptight. I know you just want to make sure Choerry’s safe. I shouldn’t have given her an answer until I knew how you felt about it.”

Jungeun pouts, her half-open eyes beginning to water. Jinsol’s eyes widen and her eyebrows go up in panic.

“Why are you crying? What’d I say?” Jinsol asks.

“JINSOL YOU ARE JUST SO GREAT- I AM MARRIED TO YOU?!” Jungeun wails, cupping Jinsol’s face and bring her in for a sloppy kiss. “Honey,” Jungeun pauses for another burp. “I didn’t need to say the thing about correcting my parenting, okay? You are trying so hard and doing so well and Yerim is *our* little egg. We should both have a say-” Jungeun burps again.

“It’s okay.” Jinsol chuckles at Jungeun’s slightly slurred speech. “What should we do while we wait for our daughter then?”

Suddenly the shrill synth of *Toxic* by Britney Spears comes on over the speakers.

“BRITNEY AGAIN!” The CFO shouts, putting both hands on her head and lets out an animalistic scream.

Jungeun looks like a drunk princess as she pulls Jinsol towards the center of the ballroom where she begins to dance wildly to the music. But, she manages to stay on beat, feeling the rhythm.

As Jinsol dances awkwardly, Jungeun brings herself closer to her, laughing.

“YOU CAN’T DANCE! YOU CAN’T DANCE!” Jungeun screams again, making Jinsol embarrassed yet again as she awkwardly moves to the fast beat. “YOU LITTLE NERD! YOU’RE JUST A LITTLE NERD,” Jungeun finishes with a nasal voice, as if bullying someone in grade school. Jinsol is so red that Jungeun cups her cheeks. “But I love you,” Jungeun insists with emotional eyes. “I love you so much, you’re my nerd,” she slurs as she grinds her body up against her wife’s.

Jinsol blushes, secretly loving the ungodly amount of attention her wife was giving her tonight. She giggles. “I love you too,” Jinsol mouths back with a dreamy smile over the music.

Yeojin finds Hyejoo on the couch alone after pushing through what felt like an endless amount of sweaty teenagers. “Hey, we’re going to leave now.”

Hyejoo snaps out of her trance. “What? Why?”

“Because Choerry doesn’t feel good and wants to go home.” Yeojin words carefully, making sure to remain vague for her friend locked in the bathroom upstairs.

“But-” Hyejoo is about to protest when Chaewon laughs loudly from the kitchen being chatted up by some freshman. Hyejoo turns to see the little blonde losing her mind at whatever the girl is saying, her hand over her mouth.

“Yeah you know what I fucking hate people anyway,” Hyejoo says, getting up and walking over to Chaewon. Yeojin rolls her eyes, watching from a distance.

“That’s hilarious I-”

“Chae.”

Chaewon turns to Hyejoo who has just interrupted her conversation.

“Oli! Hey, I was just talking to um...” Chaewon looks at the tall girl across from her.

“Aisha!” The girl says, sending a small wave to Hyejoo.

“Yeah! Aisha was telling me this really funny story, you like have to hear it.” Chaewon says, taking a bite of one of the snacks in her bowl.

“That would be great but unfortunately, we’re leaving, sorry *Aisha*.” Hyejoo responds abruptly, grabbing Chaewon’s hand and pulling her towards the living room.

Yeojin thinks that maybe if Hyejoo would turn around and see how furiously Chaewon was blushing at the connection of their hands, she might stop being so useless.

“Why are we leaving?” Chaewon asks when she sees Yeojin.

“Choerry doesn’t feel good.” Hyejoo responds, as if jealousy has nothing to do with it.

Chaewon looks at her confused, but then realizes that they are still holding hands. Chaewon looks down at them and Hyejoo catches on, immediately releasing her.

“Sorry.” Hyejoo mumbles softly.

“It’s okay.” Chaewon replies, smiling a little.

“...This is romantic and everything but we really should leave.” Yeojin is about to turn when she does a double take.

Looking around the entire party, Yeojin throws her hands up in frustration. “Where the fuck is Yeri?”

“Fuck if I know?” Hyejoo responds. “I haven’t seen her since she bolted up the stairs earlier.”

“Well she’s not upstairs, I was just up there!” Yeojin says, trying to scan the crowd again.

Chae just bites into another snack. “Look she has to be here somewhere, so we can just look around. When we find her we can go.”

With that, the girls spread out, searching for their friend.

Hyunjin thinks she hears a 20 year-old smoker yell *YERI WHERE ARE YOU?* from inside the house, but she’s a little too preoccupied (and a little too tipsy) to think anything of it.

“She set your hair on fire?!” Lia says in pure amazement.

Hyunjin and Lia had gotten a little tired of dancing and were now sitting in the house’s sunroom just off to the side of the living room. Pink and blue string lights hung from the ceiling, leaving the area dimly lit. There were a few other high schoolers occupying the area, but they were in their own little world, conversing with each other as what Hyunjin recognizes as “We Can’t Stop” by Miley Cyrus plays from the living room.

“YES!” Hyunjin screams, disrupting the peacefulness of the area. She covers her mouth looking around. Lia looks around with her and then both girls bursts out into giggles.

Much to Hyunjin’s surprise, Lia had actually been a fantastic date tonight. Besides the dancing, Lia was constantly taking her mind off of everything she had been afraid of when they first entered the party. Whether it was getting her to dance or making sure she had enough water to balance out her drinking, Lia was actually one of the coolest people Hyunjin had ever hung out with.

It had never occurred to Hyunjin that the head cheerleader’s impulsive attitude would actually free her from her own self-consciousness. Hyunjin hadn’t felt this good about herself since... Well, since before she cut everyone in her life off.

And maybe it was the flow of alcohol in her system, but she was almost positive that Lia had gotten prettier every passing minute they had been there.

“So wait, emo girl is *not* your sister... but you still babysit her after she did that?” Lia asks.

Hyunjin nods, taking a sip out of her red cup. “Yeah. I don’t know... After everything with like... The drama and stuff at school, it was kind of the only thing that made me feel like I mattered..? And yeah, she’s a handful,” Hyunjin chuckles. “But you know, I’d like to believe she’s really a good kid.”

Lia tilts her head. “You know Hyunjin, I don’t know the details of what happened with Ryujin and Hymen but... fuck them if they did something that made you feel like you didn’t matter. I mean did you see your team tonight? They like, totally missed you!”

Hyunjin offers a soft smile, for a moment, and all that can be heard is background chatter and Miley Cyrus. “Yeah, I think I’m starting to realize that I maybe didn’t need to cut everyone off.” She looks down at the floor, slightly embarrassed at how dramatic she must seem.

Lia leans down to be back in Hyunjin’s eyesight. “Hey, it’s okay you’re here now and you’re going to start talking to people again right!”

“Right.” Hyunjin chuckles and watches as Lia sits back up, taking a sip of her own drink.

“Thanks.”

“For what?” Lia asks, cup still lingering in front of her face.

“For making me have fun, even though this literally could’ve been the worst.” Hyunjin says. “Seriously, there’s no way I would’ve come here if it weren’t for you. You convinced me that maybe I’m more important to people than I thought.”

Lia blushes, and Hyunjin does too just by seeing her reaction.

“It’s not hard to be convincing when you believe it.” Lia responds. “You’re like... one of the most amazing-est people that I know.”

Hyunjin laughs. But she looks at Lia smiling in front of her, and suddenly feels a pang of guilt.

“Hey I’m... I’m sorry I avoided you so hard before.” Hyunjin looks regretful for shutting down such a great person.

Lia’s smile becomes gentler. “It’s okay,” she says in her soft voice, with a slow nod of her head. “I know I can be... bold sometimes,” she finishes, looking away with a smirk.

“Yeah but still. You’re really amazing too Lia. I wish I had seen it sooner.” Hyunjin admits. For the first time since she’s ever learned how to talk, Lia is speechless.

“30 SECONDS TO MIDNIGHT!” Hyunjin hears coming from inside the living room.

“You know, I think the countdown is overrated.” Hyunjin states. “Just say it’s midnight you know?”

Lia gasps, exaggerating the level of offense she’s taken. “No! It’s all about the suspense. The thought of starting totally fresh. Everything feels like slower and prettier when it’s happening and it makes everything so... Sparkly! You know?”

Hyunjin was pretty sure Lia was describing nostalgia, even though she had never thought of it as being ‘sparkly’ really - but she nods anyway.

“20 SECONDS!”

“Plus,” Lia’s eyes twinkle as she looks at Hyunjin. “How else would you time your New Year’s kiss?”

Hyunjin blushes and looks down at her hands.

“Well, I’ve never had a New Year’s kiss, so.” Hyunjin looks back up at Lia slowly, as to not scare her. Especially in addition to the implications she knew her response carried.

Lia just smiles. She scooches closer to Hyunjin on the couch they’re sharing.

“10!”

“That’s an easy fix.” Lia says, moving in closer.

Hyunjin can smell the other girl’s vanilla scented perfume now and she allows herself to be engulfed in the scent. Lia is looking at Hyunjin with hooded eyes, gazing at her lips.

“5!”

It was as if the world was going in slow motion, the blue and pink lights around them blurring as Hyunjin focused only on Lia.

Yeah, maybe “sparkly” *was* the perfect way to describe it.

“2!”

Lia leans in, and Hyunjin hesitates to move. But then she remembers the last time she hesitated to kiss someone.

She doesn’t think she wants to make that mistake again.

“1!”

Hyunjin meets Lia halfway, a hand gentle to Lia’s cheek as she connects their lips for a kiss.

Cheers erupt all throughout the house as people celebrate the first seconds of the new year. Fireworks bloom in the night outside.

Hyunjin wishes they were going off inside her heart too.

But right now... she supposes that didn’t really matter. This wasn’t about feelings or being in love, it was about having a good time and enjoying herself. And right now, kissing Lia at the stroke of midnight made Hyunjin feel like she was on top of the world.

Hyunjin continues to move her mouth against Lia’s, the cheerleader’s soft lips working effortlessly to make Hyunjin forget that they were even at a party. Like no one else existed.

Except, someone else did exist.

And that someone was standing by the door, her heart shattering at the sight in front of her.

“Babe, I couldn’t find you at midnight, why are you-” Ryuji approaches Heejin as Heejin tries to turn away, hiding her teary eyes.

Ryuji looks at her girlfriend reaching out to rub her arm comfortingly. She turns to find the reason for the girl’s sadness. She looks into the sunroom, where various teenagers are watching the fireworks outside and Lia is making out with someone on the sunroom couch.

Wait, that was... *Hyunjin*.

The gears in Ryuji’s head start turning and she recoils the hand that had been on Heejin’s arm.

“Are you fucking serious?” Ryuji says, her voice cold.

“What? I’m fine, I just-” Heejin attempts to save herself, knowing exactly how things look.

“I thought we were fucking over this!” Ryuji says, her voice rising. “Even when she cuts you off you *still* can’t let her go?!”

The crowd inside have ceased celebrating the new year and are instead, beginning to circle around the girls fighting outside the sunroom. Yeojin, Hyejoo and Chaewon stop their search for Yeri as they look over to the high schooler’s yelling.

“Ryuji it’s not that easy-”

“YES IT *IS*! IT’S EXACTLY THAT EASY.” She yells, breaking everyone in the sunroom out of their trances. Including Lia and Hyunjin, who are now broken apart, looking at the girlfriends fighting - well, Ryujin screaming at Heejin. Someone cuts the music, as the crowd murmurs while their collective attention shifts.

“Holy shit.” Yeojin looks at Hyejoo. “Hyunjin the WOMANIZER?”

“Shut up, it’s getting good!” Chaewon says, making them turn their attention back to the drama.

Ryujin is far from finished. “*You know,*” she scoffs angrily. “I could turn the world for you and it wouldn’t fucking matter! Because I’ll never be her. *Isn’t that right Heejin?! ”*”

“Why the fuck are you yelling at her for?” Hyunjin says, standing up from the couch and moving closer to her former friends.

Ryujin laughs harshly.

“God, first you come to my party *uninvited* and now you’re trying to be some hero? Mind your own fucking business loser.” The pink-haired girl clenches her jaw.

“You’re the one making it everyone’s fucking business by yelling at her like that.” Hyunjin says, stepping within a dangerous distance to Ryujin, her nostrils flaring.

“YEAH!” Yeojin says from her side of the circle.

Hyunjin looks over at Yeojin in shock, then looks to Hyejoo next to her. “WH- *Why are you guys here!?! ”*”

“Hi Hyunjin’s little friends!” Lia says waving as she walks over to Hyunjin.

“Oh, is this who you hangout with now Hyunjin? The kid you babysit and her gang?” Ryujin snickers cruelly. “And you’re wondering why I can’t take what you’re saying to me seriously? You’re fucking pathetic.”

Hyunjin’s breath hitches as anger floods through her veins. “You’re the pathetic one,” she growls.

“Top 10 anime battles,” Yeojin murmurs to Hyejoo and Chaewon, before they angrily *SHHHH!* her.

“What are you even doing Ryujin?” Hyunjin glares at Ryujin. “Shouting at your girl in front of all of these people at your own party. Are you insane?” Hyunjin retorts.

Heejin speaks up hesitantly. “Ryujin, can we just go. We can talk about this...”

Ryujin’s smile fades away to a look of hurt and sadness as she looks to her girlfriend at her side. “What? You want to lie to me again and tell me that you’re over it?”

Hyunjin had been feeling the blood beginning to boil inside her with every passing second, but something about Ryujin calling someone out for being a liar caused something inside Hyunjin to snap.

Hyunjin lets out a hard chuckle. “I’m sorry, how the fuck are you getting to play the victim right now?”

“Excuse me?” Ryujin glares at Hyunjin once again. The entirety of her party’s guests, save Choerry, are now crowded around the girls.

“How do you get to call ANYONE else a liar when *you did what you did to me!*?” Hyunjin shouts.

The room falls completely silent. All eyes are on Ryujin now, waiting for a response in hopes of finally understanding what caused this trio to fall apart.

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about-”

“Oh, that’s okay.” Hyunjin snaps back coldly. “Because I remember how it went down.”

Hyunjin once terrified at the mere thought of confrontation, is finally ready to end this right now. She was tired of all the looks she would get in the hallway ever since she quit soccer. She was tired of not being able to talk to anyone because they’d only ask her about what had happened. And she was so, *fucking* tired of Ryujin being able to get away with everything just because Hyunjin was too busy feeling sorry for herself.

If Hyunjin learned anything tonight, it was that she deserved better. She deserved for people to know how she was wronged.

“You were my best friend!” Hyunjin hoarses out, her eyes a little watery now. “You were my best friend, and I told you everything. I told you about things I would’ve never told anyone else! And you used it *against me?! For what?*”

Hyunjin laughs but it’s hollow, only sadness coming out of such a normally happy action. A tear drops from her face and she wipes it quickly. “I mean you could’ve just told me you liked her. It would’ve changed everything, you know! Because I *thought* of you! I was always thinking about you, because you *fucking mattered to me!*”

“Do you even know why?” Hyunjin continues, her voice cracking now as Ryujin stands, terrified of everything coming out of the other girl’s mouth. “Do you even know why I came over to your backyard all those nights ago when you were trying to get that stupid door open?”

Hyunjin doesn’t wait for Ryujin to spit back some smart ass response.

“It was because Heejin and I almost *kissed* that night. But I stopped before we did because I didn’t want you to feel like I had betrayed you.” Hyunjin says. “But you know what, maybe I should’ve. Because you did it to me without a second thought.”

“That’s why you stopped?” Heejin interrupts, the look on her face that of utter bewilderment. “I... I thought you just didn’t like me like that. And when you told me to meet you at the diner as a friend...”

Hyunjin turns to Heejin, her heart aching, ready to finally tell her the truth.

“I was so in love with you Heejin,” Hyunjin breathes bitterly, the first meaningful words she’s said to her childhood best friend in months. “I waited hours for you at that diner, ready to tell you exactly how I felt because I had fucked up so many times with you before. But this time I was going to get it right. I had flowers and everything.”

Hyunjin turns to Ryujin. “And you fucking *knew that.*”

It was as if Heejin’s entire world had just been flipped inside out. She had always assumed every ‘friend’ comment was a hint to step back, but when they would have a moment together... Heejin remembers feeling like she was losing her mind.

The only reason she had even attempted to move on was because Ryujin had confirmed her

suspensions in thinking Hyunjin was just leading her on. Ryujin had always, always told her that Hyunjin was just playing with her feelings.

And of course, Heejin believed her... Ryujin was the only person who knew Hyunjin just as well as she did. Ryujin then promised her that she would never treat Heejin the way Hyunjin supposedly was. In those weak and vulnerable moments, she was comforted by what Ryujin had told her.

But now, all Heejin feels is shame.

“Holy shit.” Hyejoo says from her place on the coach, suddenly feeling extremely sympathetic for her babysitter. Hyunjin had gone through the virtual collapse of her social life, yet still came over to the Ha estate everyday like there was nothing wrong.

Heejin looks at Ryujin, pure devastation on her face. “You... You *knew*? But when I came over that night you told me...”

Ryujin throws her hands up in defeat and fumes from her place. “*I was left out!* All of the fucking TIME I was left out! I’m sorry I got *sooo* sick of it, that I didn’t want to hear about how it would be if you two got together? So what if Hyunjin was in love with you? *I was in love with you too!*”

“You could’ve talked to us! To *me*.” Hyunjin says.

“And you could’ve asked me how I felt before anything even happened! It goes both ways.” Ryujin stands her ground.

Hyunjin steps closer to Ryujin, who’s fists are balling up just by their proximity. “No. I’m tired of feeling like I did something wrong. But you? You hurt me because you were just a jealous, insecure, manipulative little *bitch*.”

No one can even react before Ryujin swings at Hyunjin, hitting her with so much force that she stumbles backward.

Gasps erupt from the crowd as Hyunjin shakes her head, her teeth clenched for a second, before she runs forward, tackling Ryujin to the ground.

Suddenly, a small girl is above the crowd, standing on a nearby table with freshly dyed bright pink hair.

“YERI?” Yeojin, Chaewon and Hyejoo all say at once.

“Oh look little off-brand me!” Lia says, smiling at the elevated girl.

“FIIIIIGHT!!” Yeri screams at the top of her lungs, spinning her now pink ponytail around like a maniac.

The crowd erupts into chaos as Hyunjin and Ryujin destroy each other.

Heejin tries to get them off each other, but is roughly tackled by Lia in the process.

“Lia what the fuck!” Heejin says, flailing beneath the cheerleader.

“This is fun! I wanted to join!” The girl responds nonchalantly.

“Get off of me and help!” Heejin screams.

“Ugh you’re so boring, why are they even fighting over you?” Lia says, standing up regardless and

trying to get Hyunjin off of Ryujin.

“Okay hold on this is way too insane for me to ignore.” Yeojin says, pulling her phone out of her pocket. She opens Instagram to **@LilPeni\$**, and starts a live.

“YOU THOUGHT IT WAS OVER!” Yeojin says, turning the camera so that it’s on the high schoolers pummelling each other on the ground. “IT’S THE SEQUEL TO THE SMACKDOWNVERSE!” she screams into the microphone as her live viewer count begins to exponentially rise. “AND THIS TIME IT’S EVEN BETTER! HORMONAL TEEN GIRLS!”

Yeojin immediately gets a comment.

@Haseul98765434567890: It’s Mom! Puzzle break :D

@Haseul98765434567890: Haha. Where are you?

Yeojin ignores it, continuing to film the chaos in front of her.

Heejin and Lia are failing miserably to get the girls apart. Lia stands up immediately after a few tries.

“Ugh, this is so hard. I’m going to get another drink do you want something?” She offers Heejin, who just looks back at her like she has a second head.

“Like I said, so boring.” Lia mumbles before she walks away.

Hyunjin gains the upper hand, punching Ryujin straight in the nose.

“KICK HER ASS HYUNJIN!” Yeojin screams gutturally, still recording the fight, but moving the camera occasionally over to Yeri who was still helicoptering her ponytail around on top of the table.

“GET HER HYUNJIN!” Hyejoo says, Chaewon whooping behind her.

“STOP!” Heejin pleads, as the former co-captains ignore her and continue to sock each other on the floor.

Then like a flash of lightning with no warning, the front door bursts open violently.

“*KANG YERIM!*” A grown woman’s voice thunders through the entire home.

The middle schoolers stand completely frozen. They would all know that voice anywhere. Based on the petrified look Yeri had on her face, she too knew exactly who had just walked through those doors.

Yeri makes eye contact with her friends from across the room. “Oh shit.”

And there she is, God herself. President of St. Jiho’s Presidential Academy’s Parent Teacher Association Irene Kang is at the entrance of the house, complete with a pantsuit despite it being past midnight. With fire in her eyes, she scans the alcohol-smelling living room for her daughter. Her wife, Seulgi, is dressed similarly as she stumbles in. She sports a black pantsuit fitting her body perfectly, a total 180 of the random colorful outfits she wears normally.

“OH MY GOD IT’S THE FBI!” A high schooler shrieks in terror.

“THAT’S RIGHT. AND WE ARE SHUTTING THIS PARTY DOWN FOR UNDERAGE

DRINKING AND FOR WHAT I ASSUME INAPPROPRIATE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR.” Irene announces, sending everyone into a panic.

“Yeah! And the music is bad!” Seulgi chimes in from behind her wife.

“Seulgi that’s not a punishable offense...” Irene whispers. “BUT IT SHOULD BE!” she screams turning back to face the frightened teenagers, while Seulgi nods her head. Even Hyunjin and Ryujin have stopped fighting to look at her, their faces bruised and lips bloody.

“Okay I took a few shots and I’m BACK!” Lia says walking into the living room. She stops when she sees the strangers who have disrupted the chaos that may or may not be officers of the LAPD.

“Um... Not alcohol that would be bad...” Lia trails off, looking everywhere but at Irene who is now sending a death glare her way.

However, Lia sees Hyunjin on the floor and immediately goes over to help her, making sure she’s alright. Heejin does the same for Ryujin (but only out of guilty obligation).

Choerry makes her way down the stairs now, confirming the voice she was sure she heard through the bathroom vents. She randomly runs to Irene, hugging her tightly.

“Thank God.” The student body president says.

“Wait, are you these stupid kids’ moms?” Ryujin asks, holding her head. “You’re not a cop...”

Irene’s eyes flare with the questioning of her authority. “You know what you little punk! *I am* a mother, but I am also your *worst nightmare* ! I know people in high places, sports leagues, AND universities! I also know all of your parents and if you’re thinking, ‘There is no way she knows all of our parents’ then you’ll have to think again RYUJIN SHIN.” Irene spits.

Ryujin gasps then closes her mouth immediately.

“EVERYONE OUT OF HERE. NOW!” Irene barks, and high schoolers en masse flood through the tiny doorway.

Seulgi takes out a roll of stickers that say **ABOVE THE INFLUENCE** out of her bag and begins handing them out to any teenager that walks past her.

“...Fuck you.” Hyunjin spits at Ryujin. Lia helps Hyunjin off the floor, and together, they head towards the door. Heejin watches from the floor, not even sure what to do anymore.

Hyunjin touches her lip, seeing blood on her finger. “Worth it.”

“*Absolutely*,” the head cheerleader nods, taking a sticker from Seulgi with a courteous “thank you” before finally leaving the house.

Now that the rooms have been somewhat cleared, Irene is able to spot Yeri, who has been slowly trying to get off the table without bringing any attention to herself. They make eye contact, and Irene sees Yeri’s blonde hair has now turned bright pink.

“*PINK? Are you out of your mind!?*” Irene screams. Yeri lets out a shrill shriek and runs away like a chicken with its head cut off.

“Get the other kids.” Irene commands, separating herself from Choerry before sprinting after Yeri herself.

Seulgi puts an arm around Choerry as she walks over to Hyejoo, Yeojin and Chaewon.

“So!” Seulgi sings, giving them each a *Drunk Driving KILLS Innocent People* sticker. “Hooooow was the party?”

Yeri, Choerry, Hyejoo, Chaewon, and Yeojin are now in the back of Irene and Seulgi Kang’s black Cadillac Escalade.

Seulgi eggs the SUV along the residential road. Yeri is quietly crying in fear in the back of the car.

“Let’s play some music!” Seulgi offers to mask the sounds of her daughter’s fearful whimpering. A tenth of a second of radio music plays before Irene slams the power button to turn it off. “Okay...” Seulgi says quietly, feeling like one of the five terrified children in the back.

“*DO YOU KNOW WHAT PARTIES CAN DO TO YOU?!*” Irene yells from the passenger seat, breaking the thick silence of the car. “*CHILDREN ARE DYING EVERY DAY! BECAUSE OF DRUG ABUSE!*”

“That’s true, you know,” Seulgi joins in randomly with an entirely different voice, like something out of an educational video. “Do you know how many teens die from peer-to-peer drug poisoning? Fifty percent,” she finishes matter-of-factly with a raised-eyebrows nod, while Irene crinkles her eyebrows in bewilderment because she is fairly certain the statistic has absolutely no factual grounds.

“I swallowed a cough drop once. Felt like I O.D.’d,” Seulgi continues with a finger in the air. “Weed is not a gateway drug did you know that?”

“SEULGI DON’T *TELL* THEM THAT! Anyway,” Irene quickly recovers. “Do you know what even being *around* drugs can do to your developing brains?!” she practically yells.

“Yes Mother Superior...” Yeojin mutters jokingly from the backseat.

The small PTA President hears it, and turns from her seat to look at all of them square in the face.

“YEOJIN. WHERE is your mother?! You know what, I am not even surprised- CHOERRY. I have nothing to say to you because you told your mothers and I think you are a great child. *YERIM. WE WILL BE HAVING THIS CONVERSATION AT HOME. BUT YOU ARE GROUNDED. AND NO MORE ARIAN-*”

Irene is interrupted by Yeri suddenly breaking out into loud wails and sobs. “No, no *please* don’t do it-”

“NO MORE ARIANA!” Irene declares, sending Yeri to insanity as she sobs like someone just took a shit on her bed.

“This is so fuckin’ awkward,” Yeojin mutters lowly from her seat with wide eyes and a hand muffling her words.

“What were you *thinking?! Sneaking out to a house full of druggies?!?! Whose idea was this anyway! I wa-*”

Irene stops at the sound of Seulgi suddenly reversing the Escalade into a parking space much sooner than expected. Seulgi keeps doing it multiple times to make the lines align perfectly that

everyone in the car is starting to feel sick.

Irene looks around to see that they are not back at Beverly Hills but... in the parking lot of a plaza in front of a Baskin Robbins? "What are you doing!" Irene hisses at her wife.

"She's sobbing!" Seulgi defends sheepishly from the driver's seat, quietly redirecting the car to stop for ice cream because their daughter is crying in the back.

"Because we just grounded her!" Irene counters aggressively in disbelief.

"Okay well I need to stop at that CVS for some jerky." Seulgi says with absolutely no explanation.

"O..Okay.." Irene nods.

"Can we go with her," Chaewon asks weakly, jumping at the attempt to escape.

"NO. YOU'RE STAYING RIGHT HERE. WITH ME." Irene scolds. "WHERE WAS I. HYEJOO. You are a TROUBLEMAKER and your mothers are clearly not keeping a good enough eye on you!" Irene turns to Chaewon at Hyejoo's side. "WELL... HMMMMMM..." Irene says angrily as she tries to not be so obvious about the fact that she doesn't know enough about Chaewon to say anything.

But the PTA president is interrupted by Seulgi leaning over the console briefly to plant a kiss on her wife's cheek before grabbing her purse and leaving the car to buy her jerky.

Irene tries to continue yelling, but her wife's act of affection has left her blushing, distracted, and unable to form a sentence. "I forgot what I was saying."

"Gay," Yeojin blurts lowly.

"WHAT WAS THAT?" Irene barks.

"I said okay."

Choerry is giggling in her seat, while the rest of them, even Yeri with tears all over her face, fight to suppress their laughter.

Hyejoo sighs in relief when she sees Seulgi walking back from the CVS sliding doors to finally drive them all home. She adjusts her blazer and opens the driver's seat door, then hands various grocery bags to their daughter behind her. "Yerim hold these please."

Yeri takes the bags, then opens them out of curiosity to see five pints of ice cream and a handwritten note from Seulgi on a post-it she must have grabbed from the counter.

"You guys share these in the back when Mom isn't looking. I love you!"

Jiwoo had slammed the door behind her when Sooyoung followed her up to Hyejoo's room. The celebrity wouldn't even respond to Sooyoung when she apologized for fucking up again and again. They had been like this for who knows long, until Jiwoo emerged from the room to announce that the kids had arrived at the front gate.

When they had gone to retrieve them, Jiwoo told security to shut down the party and arranged for

all the kids (besides Hyejoo and Yeri) to get rides home from Jinsol. Jungeun had already passed out in the passenger seat the minute she stepped foot in it, so there was no need to worry about any car sickness for the rest of the night.

Once everyone was gone, Sooyoung thought Hyejoo would get reprimanded by her wife. Instead, Jiwoo smothered the girl into her chest and forced their child to let her lay down with her and cuddle. Sooyoung was not invited.

Now two hours had passed as Sooyoung wanders the party's empty and dirty floor, aimlessly shouting directions at any clean-up worker that came into her sight. She figured getting the party rooms back to normal would distract her from the mistakes she made tonight.

Sooyoung breathes in and heads towards the other end of the party hall at one of their outdoor terraces. She sees someone sitting in one of the soft modern couches, curled into a ball. She is about to yell at them to get out of her house, but she recognizes the woman once she gets closer.

"Jiwoo?"

Jiwoo turns slightly to look at her wife, then pouts and spins back around to look out at the dazzling lights of the city coming from the view below.

Sooyoung approaches her and smooths her dress to sit on a plush couch next to her wife.

"Can you stop ignoring me please." Sooyoung asks, her tone gentle.

"No." Jiwoo maintains, still not looking at her wife.

"Jiwoo." Sooyoung says, moving so that she's in her lover's line of vision.

The celebrity finally looks her in the eye. "You *lied* to me."

Sooyoung swallows. "I know..." she cringes. "But it was just a little white lie... You were so busy with everything and I thought it would help you. I didn't know she... You know, left the house..."

Jiwoo scoffs. "That's the whole problem Sooyoung."

"Well, what was I supposed to tell you?"

"The truth!" Jiwoo exclaims, looking at her wife like it was the most obvious answer in the world.

Sooyoung's mouth is open, but nothing is coming out. Jiwoo sighs and turns back to the city.

"Please just go. Don't talk to me or else I'll spray you with Raid."

Sooyoung's eyebrows furrow. "What? Honey-"

Suddenly, Jiwoo picks up a can of industrial bug spray from the floor and starts shaking it aggressively.

"JIWOO." Sooyoung says, placing her arm on the can and gently lowering it back to the floor. "I'm so sorry. I know I've said that countless times tonight but I was really..."

Sooyoung thinks about why she didn't go check up on her daughter and honestly, it was because she didn't know how to. Everything had been so perfect on Christmas and afterwards, well, Sooyoung frankly didn't trust herself in keeping it that way. She knew neglecting her child wasn't necessarily great either, but what other choice does she have?

"I-I just didn't want to bother her." Sooyoung continues, her low, sweet voice sounding exhausted as she tries her best to formulate the words. "She was with her friends, I was making my rounds Jiwoo. I thought she would be okay."

Jiwoo doesn't look at Sooyoung. "Thinking isn't the same as doing."

"I know." Sooyoung responds. "I really am sorry. But I know now!"

"You need to be a little better." Jiwoo says bluntly, still looking out at the exploding fireworks over Los Angeles.

"...I'm sorry I made you scared."

Made me scared? Jiwoo thinks in disbelief, looking at her wife. *Does she even care about the life she put at risk?*

Jiwoo is still looking away when Sooyoung invites herself to her wife's couch, joining her and wrapping her arms around her. Jiwoo doesn't object to it - at least, not verbally.

But she turns to look at Sooyoung, some kind of sincerity behind her fierce brown eyes. Jiwoo can't help but fall back into them. Must be force of habit.

Sooyoung brings her wife into her lap, and Jiwoo's rigid demeanor begins to fall away.

After all, Jiwoo guesses she can brush this aside, she thinks, relishing the feeling of her wife's skin on hers in the cold midnight air.

It's the holidays. *It's fine*, Jiwoo tells herself.

It's fine.

"Why are you down here anyway? I thought you were going to sleep in Hyejoo's bed." Sooyoung asks by Jiwoo's ear, changing the subject.

"She kicked me out after 2 hours. She said I was 'messing up her oxygen flow' because I was squeezing her too tight. Apparently I'm too clingy." Jiwoo says, looking at Sooyoung with sadness in her eyes.

Sooyoung chuckles a little, thinking of how affectionate her wife can be.

"I love when you're clingy," the CEO whispers.

Jiwoo crinkles her nose, then turns to look at Sooyoung. "Really?"

Sooyoung smiles as their eyes meet. "Really," she says, leaning in for a chaste kiss.

Jungeun wakes up with the worst hangover she's ever had in her entire life.

She groans when she comes to, her head swimming in nausea. "Sol," she whimpers with a hand over her eyes to block out the over-ocean sunlight streaming in. Still with closed eyes, her hand retreats to Jinsol's side of the bed only to find it cold.

The CFO pouts. She's sure her wife left her a little text on her whereabouts, considerate as Jinsol is not to wake her, but the light from the phone won't help her migraine. She closes her eyes again.

But the hangover is really starting to make her so hungry that it hurts, as if a tapeworm were eating away at her insides. After five slow minutes of contemplation, she decides to get up. Just for some avocado toast.

Jungeun groans painfully, lifting herself out of bed so dramatically that one would think she's eighty just based off of the noises alone.

She grips the railing of her spiral staircase around the glowing blue fish tank with half-open eyes, as bright sunlight streams through the home and makes every white wall shine.

Suddenly, she hears the opening of a cupboard from the kitchen. *Probably Choerry*, she thinks.

As she traverses down the staircase, she is able to catch a glimpse of the scene.

Her eyes shoot open and all the hair on her body stands up at the sight of a completely unfamiliar woman with jet black hair rummaging through their cupboards. Her back is turned, and Jungeun has *no idea* who this intruder is.

Her heart races in her chest as she tip-toes down the last stairs towards the intruder, reaching to lift a stray cast-iron skillet to bang on her head and knock her out.

She creeps up behind the woman, raising the giant pan to her head like a baseball bat. Jungeun is now only a foot behind her-

At the sound of one step too loud, the woman turns around right into Jungeun raising a giant pan to slam her with. The unfamiliar woman lets out a very familiar shriek.

"THIEF-"

"OH MY GOD JUNGUN WHAT ARE YOU *DOING!*?"

Jungeun's eyes nearly pop out of their sockets as she screams. It's Jinsol, Jinsol's face, but it's all *wrong* - it's not blonde hair anymore, it's *BLACK* and it's-

"*JINSOL?!?!?*"

Jinsol is the closest thing to being in a fetal position while still standing up, in fear of brain damage via her wife with a cast-iron skillet. "It's me," the CEO mews out behind her hands covering her face.

"I'm sorry, oh I'm so sorry honey I thought you were, oh my *God*," Jungeun puts the pan on the granite island and rubs her wife's shoulders comfortingly, and her hands can't help but linger on Jinsol's freshly dyed black hair.

Jinsol is looking away like a shy little schoolgirl, adding even more perplexity to the situation at hand. "I wanted it to be a surprise..." she admits tucking dark hair behind her ear.

"You- You, wh-" Jungeun is stuttering in shock. In all the years she's known her wife, since the very moment they'd met, Jinsol had a head of blonde hair. For who knows how long, Jinsol had religiously doused her head in blonde hair dye to maintain the exact same light shade. Even though it obviously wasn't, Jungeun had subconsciously accepted blonde as Jinsol's natural hair color.

"I got it done this morning," Jinsol is now looking at her, and Jungeun is taking in the sight as a whole. "Do... Do you like it?" Jinsol asks, surprisingly self-conscious with all the blood rushing to her cheeks.

Jungeun's pupils dilate at the sight. It's all so odd, and new, but it's all so... *hot*?

"The kids kept telling me... In the car, that the blonde was "clapped" but I-I can change it back if you want." Jinsol looks away nervously.

"Are you *kidding* me," Jungeun breathes involuntarily with dark eyes, eyeing her wife up and down. Jinsol looks back at her nervously. "You... you're so..." Jungeun can't even find the words, unable to control her speech.

"What?" Jinsol is smiling, fighting back laughter as the shorter woman in front of her is looking at her in what only can be described as lusting desire. "You like it?"

Jungeun just pauses, eating Jinsol up with very dark eyes.

"*Why didn't you do this earlier,*" Jungeun suddenly sounds *very* sexually frustrated.

Jinsol's eyes widen. She didn't expect to get *this* strong of a reaction. The CEO grins, confidence restored.

"So you *do* like it..." Jinsol says in a lower voice, eyeing her needy wife inching closer towards her.

Jungeun's entire body is now nearly pressed up against Jinsol's. The woman's eyelids are hooded as she looks at her wife.

Jungeun leans in seductively, but instead of kissing Jinsol's skin she brings her lips to her ear.

"I want you to break my back," Jungeun whispers. "Like a glowstick..."

Jinsol snorts so loud and bursts into incredulous laughter, completely ruining Jungeun's intro to what sounds like the beginning of a very bad porno.

"WHAT!" Jungeun defends, red with embarrassment and very judged from her attempt at being less "uptight".

Her wife is holding her stomach and nearly doubling over. "What the fuck did you just say?" she says between laughs.

Jungeun is turning more red by the millisecond. "I *SAID*-"

Jinsol cuts her off by closing the gap between their lips. She brings her hands to the small of Jungeun's back to pull her body back flush against her own, as Jinsol continues to deepen their kissing and Jungeun's arms move to wrap around Jinsol's neck.

Jinsol leaves impatient open-mouthed kisses on the sensitive skin of her wife's neck, eliciting especially loud high-pitched moans as Jungeun lets her head fall back. Encouraged by Jungeun's sweet noises, she leaves bites on her wife's most sensitive spots.

Jinsol turns them around, pressing Jungeun hard against the counter as she lets her hands start to roam. Jungeun grabs her wife's face and to kiss her again and again, as if addicted to the taste of her lips.

Jinsol can't remember the last time she's seen her wife so desperate to be taken. It was as if only Jinsol could provide what she needed, and it was a major turn on.

Jungeun breaks away, breathless. "Did you know sex is the best cure for a hangover," she whispers

seductively on Jinsol's lips, letting her fingers tangle through her wife's black hair.

Jinsol ponders the statement as she continues to kiss her again and again. After a few seconds, she breaks them apart. "That's not scientifically accurate," she whispers back with the same sexy tone of voice.

Jungeun lets out a giddy laugh, smiling into their kisses as Jinsol lifts her wife up onto the kitchen counter. Jinsol breaks the kiss, only to place her mouth on her wife's neck, slowly moving downward as her wife's heartbeat increased, fingers tangled in her hair.

Jinsol thinks to herself that she should have dyed her hair a long time ago.

Hyejoo had been relentlessly practicing her *Call of Duty* skills ever since the epic night of New Year's last night. She figured it was a great way to spend her last days of winter break. Plus, she'd be damned if she ever let Choerry Kim outdo her at a game ever again.

Hyejoo plops down on the game room's bean bag chair, placing a few snacks and drinks on the coffee table in front of them. Her mothers were out for the day, tending to their usual responsibilities; so once again it was only Hyunjin and Hyejoo alone in the mansion.

Obviously, Jiwoo and Sooyoung had their doubts about letting Hyunjin come back to work with the whole situation that could easily be interpreted as attempted kidnapping. However, Hyejoo explained in great detail to her mothers that the babysitter had absolutely nothing to do with bringing them to the party. That Hyunjin hadn't even known they were there.

If she was being honest, she would feel awful if she had cost Hyunjin her only source of income, especially after all she learned about her that night.

Speaking of Hyunjin, the babysitter enters into the game room to join the eighth grader. (Hyejoo always wants to be alone, but Hyunjin has always obnoxiously insisted on never letting the girl be alone in a room for "safety purposes".)

"Here you go." Hyunjin says, opening a soda can. "I got myself one too, I hope that's okay."

Usually, Hyejoo would throw a fit about Hyunjin taking one of the expensive sodas her parents had shipped in from Japan. Today though? Hyejoo decides against it, since she can't look at Hyunjin or hear her voice without thinking of the pain in her eyes when she watched Hyunjin profess her love, or the sweetness in her voice as she sang along to "Ribs" in the car.

Hyejoo just shrugs. "Sure."

Hyunjin, a little stunned to Hyejoo's lack of resistance, doesn't question it, and instead takes a sip. Her phone pings and she opens the notification, revealing a Snapchat message from Lia. She giggles, and sends a picture of half her face back.

Hyejoo, who normally says nothing pleasant or nothing at all to her babysitter, looks away from the noisy gun game a little. "So are you and Lia dating now or something?"

Hyunjin looks up in surprise at Hyejoo asking her a personal question, not really knowing how to answer since they've never talked like this before. "No... We're just friends."

Hyejoo nods, not necessarily believing her. She turns her view back to the game. "So you're talking to people again then?"

Hyunjin looks over at Hyejoo bashfully, setting her phone down. “Yeah. I... I’m thinking of re-joining the soccer team actually. If they’ll take me.”

“Cool.” Hyejoo says nodding. “What about... Heejin.”

Hyunjin slumps slightly, trying very hard not to let her obvious sadness trickle through. “I don’t know. I don’t want to reach out.”

Hyejoo can tell she’s lying. *Poor girl*, the middle schooler thinks. *Still hung up on Heejin even after everything that happened.*

Maybe they just needed a push to talk to each other. Hyejoo makes sure to keep a mental note for any open opportunities.

Hyejoo taps at the controller nervously, working up the courage to finally pause the game. She looks over at her babysitter.

“Hyunjin.” Hyejoo calls dryly.

Hyunjin looks at the eighth grader. “Hmm?”

“You’re really cool.”

Hyunjin just stares back in silence, trying to process what Hyejoo has just said to her.

“What?”

“Don’t make me say it again.” Hyejoo snaps, mirroring her mother. “I said you’re pretty cool. Seeing you at the party standing up for yourself. It was great.”

Hyunjin looks like she’s about to cry tears of joy and Hyejoo regrets speaking for a second.

“Thanks, Olivia.” Hyunjin says back with a smile.

“Yeah.” Hyejoo responds, about to unpause the game before making yet another risky decision.

Wordlessly, she throws a stray controller in Hyunjin’s direction as an offer to play with her. Hyunjin is, of course, utterly ecstatic.

The middle schooler goes back to the main menu and shows Hyunjin the buttons. Hyejoo puts the game in Zombie mode and hits start. The first level begins and they make their way through the rounds easily, Hyunjin understanding the importance of her virtual cooperation with Hyejoo immediately. The younger girl didn’t want to admit it, but Hyunjin was the best video game partner she’s had ever had.

Other than Chaewon of course, but still. A pretty great partner indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t be a passive consumer of art... Actively engage with art...
a.k.a. this takes a lot of time to plan and execute (especially as busy college students)
so we would really appreciate if you left a detailed comment with all your thoughts <3

:D - Cat

P.S. I know this chapter had little to no Haseul, we planned out all the scenes before she announced her medical leave :'(The next chapter will have lots of Principal Haseul, we promise!

I FUCKING LOVE HYUNJIN ANYONE ELSE??? i know yall probably miss viseul and im sorry BUT don't worry u will be getting your meal very soon. and any type of comment is appreciated really detailed or sporadic ones with no context that are just like WHAT THE HELL they make me giggle. just your support is enough!! also i cant stop listening to any song because of dodaeng i watch that video of them dancing to it 20 times a day.

WHOS READY FOR #??? JINSOUL IS MEXICAN - daniela

Let us know what you think of this chapter in the comments or via CC!
- curiouscat.me/catmsdqna (Cat)

Valentine's Day

Chapter Notes

Our LAST segment of the Jam-Packed Holiday Chapters Extraordinaire... All I can say before we return to PTA events is that I believe in Family!OEC supremacy
- Cat

p.s. Our Jinsol does not have bangs... yet...? idk we'll see stay tuned

yall better enjoy this shit bc once it's over we're not gonna be so cute anymore
SLDKJFSLDKJ also my shoulder hurts so bad and i got a dog - daniela

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Should I tell Chad I love him?”

The question cuts Jinsol Kim entirely off guard, as she ends up swerving her car and nearly spilling her latte all over the console. Is her daughter out of her mind? “...Your boyfriend?”

Choerry nods in confirmation. *After all, it is Valentine's Day this Friday... Isn't this what you're supposed to do?*

Jinsol's eyes dart around the windshield as if someone is going to be outside to tell her that she's being pranked.

She doesn't know much about Choerry's stinky Romeo (Not that she really wanted to). Choerry has talked about him fondly on a handful of car rides, but Jinsol knows that there is *no* chance her daughter *loves* that boy. Still though, she tries her best to mask her disapproval for the sake of precious Choerry's heart.

“...Well... I mean... Do you?”

“Yes,” Choerry says shakily from the shotgun seat, and Jinsol catches her hesitation in the corner of her eye. The confirmation convinces neither of them, and there's an awkward silence over “Gimme Love” by Carly Rae Jepsen playing from the Tesla's stereo. “I mean, I don't know... I guess?”

Jinsol almost gags because she can practically *smell* Chad's body odor from here. The only reason she stops herself is because Choerry is seated right next to her.

“When did you know you first loved Mommy?” Her child asks.

Jinsol's eyebrows rise at the unanswerable question, and Choerry sees a soft, inexplicable light fill her mother's eyes as the Tesla ebbs along through the noisy freeway traffic.

“Umm,” her mother hums softly, unsure and cocking her head as if trying to pinpoint an exact moment.

Was it the first time Jinsol shared pancakes with her, and knew she wanted to eat breakfast with Jungeun as many times as she could? Or the time Jungeun blew through two hours and three whole Expo markers avidly proving the beauty of mathematical economics? Or was it their very first date,

when her future wife laughed so hard Diet Coke came spurting out of her nose?

“What does love... feel like?” Choerry asks, as innocent as a young girl just barely learning the word.

Jinsol smiles a little, as warm familiarity spreads through her body.

“...Loving your mother feels like...” The CEO narrows her eyes, concentrating hard and wanting to do the emotion justice. Jinsol drums her fingers gently on the steering wheel. “Whenever I see her... I... Really don’t care about anyone else in the room.”

“Hey!” their eighth grader immediately exclaims, taking personal offense.

“Besides you sweetie, I love you so much,” Jinsol laughs heartily with apologetic eyes still on the road. “It doesn’t matter who else is in the room, because... she’s the only one that needs to be there for me.”

Choerry smiles as Jinsol continues. “...And I knew before you were born, that if the entire world just disappeared... and the only person that was left was Mommy, I know I’d be okay.”

Their eighth grader melts as she hugs her pink Kanken closer to her chest.

“Does that answer your question?” Jinsol tilts her head a bit to look at Choerry, who just nods.

The eighth grader thinks about what life would be like if everyone else but Chad disappeared. Her eyebrows involuntarily furrow together in distress. Choerry wishes it did, but it doesn’t sound like the best time in the world - in fact, it doesn’t sound like a good time at all. *What would we even talk about?*

Choerry racks her brain for the people she’d consider dancing in a world alone with. Both of her mothers. Yeojin, definitely. Olivia, Yeri, Chaewon-

Jinsol’s calm, loving voice brings her out of her thoughts. “So, are you gonna tell him?”

“I don’t think so,” the words escape Choerry’s lips before she can even process what they mean. She can’t help but think something is wrong with her for voicing them.

I don’t think I do.

“What are *you* doing for Mommy on Valentine’s Day?” Choerry inquires, changing the subject to regain peace of mind.

Jinsol crinkles her eyebrows in thought, confronted with the question that she had also been asking herself lately. How does one know exactly what to get their wife on Valentine’s Day? The only thing that Jinsol really knows is that she wants this one to be good. *Really* good. Especially considering that she hasn’t been the most considerate partner for a long time.

Over the past few years, Jinsol never had time for more than a fancy night out. But this year, she’d taken vacation days for not only the Friday of Valentine’s Day, but the entire weekend and the Monday as well.

“I’m not sure, Choerry,” Jinsol says honestly. “I’m still figuring out a proper birthday gift as well.”

(Jungeun’s birthday was yesterday, the tenth of the month, but she’d been extremely busy all this week and insisted any gift-giving be postponed to the weekend. This, however, did not stop

Choerry from baking her the biggest birthday cake their pantry would allow, with Jinsol's help.)

"Oh," Choerry nods. "I got her a big thermos for her coffee, and I painted it at school," the eighth grader says proudly.

"*God* you're good," Jinsol responds in jealousy of their daughter's (inherited) expertise in thoughtful gift-giving. "Hey, how come I never got anything like that for my birthday?"

"Well... You..." Choerry struggles with her words. She debates on saying it, but really, there isn't any other answer. "You weren't really around for me to give you anything."

Jinsol's heart suddenly drops to her stomach, and Choerry looks away - she doesn't dare look at her mother to face the damage she knows she must have caused with that remark.

Jinsol is speechless and hurt, but doesn't know what else to do besides focus on the road in front of her and continue driving. After all, Choerry is right.

"But I'm glad you're here, Mom," Choerry turns to say sincerely with a soft voice. "I'm really glad you're here now."

Choerry turns the baby blue corridor to face the barren St. Jihyo's schoolyard, and sees Dahyun furiously interrogating her screen with her finger under the cafeteria awning. The two student council officers were scheduled to sell student council Valentine Grams together during recess, and were excused from art class a few minutes early to set up the station.

The pink-haired, taller eighth grader sets the cash box on the shiny silver surface of the outdoor lunch table. The *empty* lunch table.

"Wait," she pauses in confusion, "The candy for the grams... Where did it go?"

"We're out," Dahyun looks up and stares blankly back at Choerry.

"...I just gave you a whole bag? You were supposed to put them out."

"Well," Dahyun responds, the Tik Tok star's tongue visibly blue. "They purchased a lot."

Choerry looks around the ghosttown of a blacktop. Not a single sound, other than the wind rustling through the nearby oak trees. "They? Who is they?"

"You know... they..." Dahyun squints as if trying to figure out if she's fooling Choerry at all. Which, the fellow eighth grader absolutely was not.

"But... you didn't even have the cash box how could you-"

"DON'T RAISE YOUR TONE WITH ME!" Dahyun cries out dramatically.

Choerry sighs in defeat. This is gonna be a long shift.

"Okay, I guess I can get more-" But the president is cut off by the *RRRRRIIING!* of the school bell, doors swinging open from all buildings, and the St. Jihyo's students pouring out into the blacktop with their snacks from home.

Choerry groans, quickly whipping out her iPhone.

Choerry: Hey can you do me a huge favor?

Yejin: my rate is 10 dollars a minute.

Choerry: All I can give you is my gratitude uwu

Yejin: ... ig i'm not one to turn away the poor

Yejin: what is up

Choerry: Can you bring a bag of Dum Dum's from the office to the blacktop? Tell them Choerry sent you! But you should probably show them these texts I feel like they won't believe you if you just ask.

Yejin: excuse me. i couldve charmed my way into getting that candy.

Choerry: from PTA President Kang?

Yejin: ...tea ok

Choerry: :D

"Where's the candy?" A venomously feminine voice makes Choerry freeze and nearly drop her phone to the floor. The one and only Nayeon smirks down at her from the customer end of the table.

The student council vice president had fully recovered from her injuries from being battered by Hyejoo Ha in the St. Jihyo's gym.

(One of the said injuries was having her head hit so hard that a section of her scalp about the size of a CD-ROM can no longer grow hair. Nayeon had to have permanent extensions implanted.)

Now that the bitch was back, her usual bullying antics only occurred whenever Choerry was separated from Hyejoo. Nayeon is physically unable to walk past Hyejoo without cowering behind the nearest locker door and clutching her purse closer to her chest.

Choerry clears her throat, trying to compose a killer comeback to Nayeon's question from what her friends had taught her recently. *Up your ass*, Hyejoo would say. *Your mom!* Chaewon would retort nonsensically.

Before Choerry can speak, the eighth grader to her side does - "We ran out," Dahyun proclaims again as if she didn't eat an entire down of mini blue raspberry Airheads while Choerry was getting the cash box.

From the corner of her eye, Choerry sees Yejin jogging over with a giant opened bag of Dum Dum lollipops, one already hanging out of her mouth.

"Heeey- Oh woow," the short runt of a girl immediately turns sarcastic upon laying eyes on the one and only Nayeon. "Choerry I guess we didn't need any candy... Because the real treat is right here!"

"Go fuck yourself," Nayeon snaps. The vice president makes a face of disgust at the shorter girl, and the sight of them is a juxtaposition to behold - Nayeon flipping her perfectly straightened hair and smoothing her skirt, Yejin scowling up at her with her St. Jihyo's sweatshirt two sizes too big.

“Here ma’am.” The principal’s daughter spills all the lollipops onto the table, helping Choerry sort them out.

“What *really* happened to the first bag, Choerry?” Nayeon snaps with a tone holier-than-thou. She scoffs. “Did you eat them all?”

Before Choerry can even react, Yeojin turns around swiftly, throwing her lollipop straight out of her own mouth, sticking it to Nayeon’s polo shirt. Nayeon gasps, staring down at her garments and then back to the girl. However, Yeojin is already speaking before Nayeon gets the chance to complain.

“No she didn’t actually, because the only person with a mouth big enough to fit all that is you.” Yeojin steps closer to the now offended girl. Nayeon glares at her with a passion straight from hell. “I could fit in there. I could fucking climb into your mouth,” Yeojin continues to threaten with the whiplash-inducing sudden seriousness of an animal abuse commercial, “And split you open from the inside.”

Choerry has to keep herself from laughing.

“*Bite* me you stupid little dyke,” Nayeon hisses at Yeojin with grit teeth, inches away from her face.

“Don’t flatter yourself. I would chew you up and spit you out, you little cunt fart,” Yeojin retorts without skipping a beat.

Suddenly, the overly-ecstatic voice of Principal Haseul is heard from the other end of the cafeteria. “*OOOH!* VALENTINE GRAMS!”

Nayeon expects Yeojin to back down at the sound of her mother, but she just continues to stare her down. The student council vice president isn’t so sure she can spin a lie that Principal Haseul’s own daughter began harassing her first.

“UGH!” Nayeon spins out of Yeojin’s vicinity, lets out some other high-pitched animalistic noise, and walks away. Dahyun just sits there watching them, a Dum Dum of her own in her mouth.

“Dahyun!” Choerry scolds. “These are for the customers!”

“I think you are being very CAPITALIST right now.” Dahyun says.

Choerry turns to Yeojin gratefully. “Thanks,” the star student sighs with a relieved smile.

“She’s just a bitch.” Yeojin responds, smiling a little back. “Anyway, I want to buy one gram. Gotta keep up my annual secret admirer prank streak.”

Yeojin hands a dollar over to Choerry, who in exchange, gives her a little red card. Yeojin starts writing on it as Haseul jogs up to the table in a similar fashion to her daughter. Except, for some reason, she’s wearing a sombrero.

“Hello darling angel children! How do you all like my new hat!” their principal asks Choerry, Yeojin, and Dahyun with a big wide smile.

Yeojin turns to slap the sombrero off her head, sending it to the floor.

“Yeojin! Don’t, I spent \$200 on that!” Haseul cries, picking up the sombrero and tucking it under her arm.

“WHY?” Yeojin shrieks, but Haseul continues on.

“How’s everything going chicas?”

“Great, ‘cause I’m leaving.” Yeojin says, handing over her purchased gram to Choerry. “See you seventh period.”

With that, the little eighth grader walks away. Haseul huffs out and regains her positive composure.

“Anyway, I just came over because I have a gram to turn in. I already paid.” Haseul holding out a pink piece of paper. It’s sealed shut with heart tape, as if to make sure no one sees what’s inside, even by accident.

“OOooOoh Principal Haseul, who are you sending a gram to?” the pink-haired president teases.

“WHAT? I’M NOT.” Haseul basically screams at the students sitting in front of her. “I mean... It’s not... I’m.... Haha um...”

“I don’t need to know!” Choerry backtracks after seeing how horribly the older woman was struggling with an excuse.

“Thank you.” Haseul wipes an imaginary droplet of sweat from her forehead. “Well, have a wonderful sales day girls!”

Haseul leaves the table, and Dahyun immediately turns to her, both hands on the table.

“You have to open that,” the Tik Tok star says, her mouth basically watering for gossip.

Choerry will admit, she *is* curious, but her good morals get the better of her. “No, that’s invading her privacy.” She drops the paper into a locked box she has under the table for finished grams.

“BOOOOOO.” Dahyun shouts, returning to angrily tap on her phone.

Choerry chuckles at the idea of her goofy principal being lovesick.

Maybe it’s because of her mushy, lovey dovey mothers, but Choerry will always melt at even the smallest notion of romance. Although, she’s not really sure if her principal sending a middle school Valentine’s gram is really romantically acceptable for her age.

But now, she does know one thing: Principal Haseul definitely has a crush.

Jinsol cranes her neck to look through her dashboard window, at the radiating store placard proudly donning the words **SEX SHOP**. The neat cursive is lit a bright pink, the neon glowing softly through today’s cloudy air. The scientist stares at the entrance with wide eyes, unable to bring herself to leave the driver’s seat of her Tesla. She drove all the way to the unkempt streets of downtown Hollywood solely so she wouldn’t run into anyone from work.

What exactly does Jungeun *want* for Valentine’s Day ? That was the question driving Jinsol crazy all morning. There are just so many options, and the pressure is on. Countless thoughts fire through Jinsol’s head - what if her wife doesn’t like her gift, what if it’s not good enough, and many, many more.

So after an astronomical bout of overthinking, the CEO decided to start right here. At the sex shop. Because that’s what people do for this type of thing. *Right?*

Somehow, Jinsol manages to peel her behind off of the car seat and talk herself into going inside. At the very least, she promises herself that she'll take a look around.

The bells above the glass door jingle as the now-brunette steps through into the cramped space. The sex mart smells of some ancient incense that is probably supposed to serve as an aphrodisiac, but for some reason is making Jinsol uncomfortable.

She freezes in confusion at the daunting sight of headless mannequins all wearing very scary-looking harnesses or restraints. She doesn't ever want to make Jungeun wear that. Unless she wanted to. She never has before. *Wait, would she want that now?*

Jinsol takes another look around at the rainbow plethora of oddly-shaped phallic silicon on every shelf, and decides to walk to the vibrators because at least she knows what those are.

"PUT THE MONEY IN THE BAG!" A familiar female voice desperately trying to be deep shouts in front of the cash register, and an instantly on-edge Jinsol turns to look over the shelf to take in what looks like attempted robbery. A woman in an expensive-looking floral dress has a gorilla mask over her head and is scaring the poor retail workers to death.

"What bag?!?" a horrified employee cries out.

"I SAID PUT IT IN THE BAG!"

The employees have no idea what to do.

The masked woman then starts laughing in an even more familiar high-pitched chime. "I'm just kidding!" she says in her normal girly-girl voice. "Where are the whips?"

Jinsol narrows her eyes in realization. "*Jiwoo?*" she asks, just loud enough for the masked woman to hear. And she whips around immediately; Jinsol can already see that pearly white smile despite it being masked by the face of King Kong.

"JINSOL!" Jiwoo squeals, her chirpy voice muffled by the mask, and leaves the cashiers excitedly to mosey on over. *Of course it is*, Jinsol thinks to herself.

"Fancy seeing you here!" the international celebrity giggles with a promiscuous *Tee-hee*. "Are you lost or something?!"

Jinsol looks around nervously with a "What- Why would I be lost-"

"Don't play dumb with me Jinsol," Jiwoo asserts. "I know about the time you tried spanking your wife and you cried."

Jinsol's face flushes as she looks around defensively. "*What are you talking about!*"

"Listen sweetie," Jiwoo lowers her voice and leans in a little as if sharing a secret. "This is not your part of town. This is hard shit," she says menacingly through the gorilla mask right by Jinsol's face.

"I-I don't know what any of these things are," Jinsol whispers back with a spooked look on her face, which elicits a giggling fit from Jiwoo. "Wait- Can you help me?"

"Oh, you can't reach the handcuffs?" Jiwoo misunderstands, looking up at the shelf next to them full of variations of restraints. "You're taller than me, but alright, put your hands out-"

“What?” Jinsol asks in utter confusion. “No, I’m... I’m looking for a gift...”

“For JUNGUN?!” Jiwoo shouts in disbelief, and Jinsol shushes her profusely in fear of yet another person from her personal or business life being present in this sex shop. Jiwoo is now laughing into her hand as the two stand lodged in between the narrow aisles.

“Stop!” Jinsol whines.

“Jinsol,” Jiwoo says, tone suddenly shifting to serious. “I just saw Jungie’s shoulders relax for the first time in ten years. If you bring her anything from this store I promise you they will rise back up again.”

The CEO huffs, and looks back at the rack of toys. “I just don’t know what to do...”

Jiwoo pouts at the adorable sight - Jinsol really is putting a lot of effort into this. “I think,” Jiwoo says, proceeding to try on a BDSM leather vest at the same time. “That she will love anything thoughtful from you. I know she doesn’t show it well sometimes, but your wife is such a little softie,” she supplies, making Jinsol smile a little because yes, she knows.

“Has she mentioned anything she might want?”

“Hmm... No, not particularly!” Jiwoo says, and hates the disappointment she sees in Jinsol’s eyes. “Wait a minute, let me just get this and I’ll think,” she retreats for a second to go to a neighboring shelf. Jiwoo comes back with a coiled whip in her hand.

Jinsol stares with extremely wide eyes. “You...” she cringes. “You let Sooyoung... Use that on you?”

Jiwoo wiggles her eyebrows mischievously. “Who said she would be the one using it!”

“*LALALALALA*,” Jinsol has now clapped her hands over her ears and refusing to let herself learn anymore atrocious details of her archnemesis’s sex life.

Jiwoo giggles even more under the mask.

“Why are you even wearing that...”

“The press follow me everywhere! Nobody needs to know America’s sweetheart likes to be tied up and fucked from the back-”

“OKAY STOP!” Jinsol looks like she just forcibly drank spoiled milk. “AAH! *LALALALALA!*”

“Anyways, Jungeun doesn’t really talk about wanting material things..? But... She does always complain about how everything is so noisy and busy all the time. You know, with the city and everything. If I were you... Maybe a getaway?” Jiwoo suggests.

The idea had never once crossed Jinsol’s mind. “Jiwoo, you’re a genius!” Jinsol praises with wide eyes.

“I know, I know.” Jiwoo nods, with a self-assured bump of her shoulder.

“But wait, that would take a few days... What are we gonna do with Choerry?”

“Leave her at our place! We should be back by Saturday morning!” Jiwoo suggests enthusiastically.

Jinsol takes one look at the harness around the gorilla-masked woman, and then the coiled whip in her hand. “Yeah... No thanks,” Jinsol declines politely. *Poor Hyejoo*, the CEO thinks to herself with an alarmed expression.

“Wait... Wait but this could work, we can leave her with my mom for the long weekend!” Jinsol says to herself with wide eyes while the puzzle pieces connect in her brain.

“Oh! Speaking of the weekend, I have to go finish up a few things! I still need to go to the store and buy a bicycle for me and Sooyoung’s *special* Valentine’s. You don’t even want to *know* what that’s going to be used for...” Jiwoo’s eyes are practically rolling back into her head.

“Haha you’re right! I do not!” Jinsol says with a weirded-out smile, trying her best not to come off as rude. “I’ll be seeing you then Jiwoo!”

A *getaway*, Jinsol thinks, as the shop door’s bells chime above her in farewell. And as she looks back at her car, behind it, she spots something new - a ski shop.

And just like that, Jinsol lights up with inspiration.

Three days later, the entire student body of St. Jihyo’s is shuffling into the school gymnasium for Principal Haseul’s mandatory Valentine’s Day assembly. The walls are swamped with pink and red streamers; the same colors of shiny balloons float around the floor freely. A small stage is set up in the middle of the floor, a podium on top of it covered in random heart and cupid decor.

Small voices fill the room with chatter as pools of students make their way inside. Yeojin and the usual gang all walk in with a crowd of their peers to find their way to the bleachers. That is, the usual gang, plus a few others following Yeri.

After the news broke throughout middle school that the Tiddie Jugglers attended a high school party, they had a small spike in popularity. However, every other middle schooler seemed to be most infatuated with Yeri since she was the only girl actually caught on camera (Various remixes had been made already, much of which included “the girl helicopter-hairing on the table” in what was yet another viral hit for Lil Peni\$).

“Johnny, please hold off the rest of this bench, it will only be for my friends and I.” Yeri says to a tall eighth grade boy who had personally offered to be the girl’s bodyguard. For what reason? No one really knew, but Yeri clearly did not mind. Her white shoes jumped onto the bleachers, careful not to wrinkle her purple skirt and clean white shirt.

The group of friends rolled their eyes as Johnny lets them into the bleacher bench. Yeojin, passing first, stops and reaches up to pat Johnny’s shoulder which is above Yeojin’s eye level.

“Thank you for your service Gumby, I’m sure you’re honored to serve your queen.” The principal’s daughter tips her white bucket hat, starting to curtsy, but Chaewon pushes her playfully, sending her forward into the bleachers. Johnny ignores her as the rest of the girls climb into their seats. He stops some of Yeri’s groupies from sitting next to them, blocking the way.

“Fame really is crazy sometimes...” Yeri says, flipping her long and now black hair over her shoulder. (Irene had dyed it back to its natural color the second they had gotten home from Chuu Year’s Yves.)

“You need help.” Hyejoo says flatly, causing the rest of the girls to giggle. Chaewon places a hand on Hyejoo’s arm as she laughs, making the emo child blush.

The richest child in the world puts her hands in her black *Dauspice* jacket pockets awkwardly. Her right hand grazes a small pastry box. Hyejoo had spent all night making Chaewon a Valentine's Day gift. Well, technically Jiwoo made it - the small pink heart-shaped macaron - but she had watched its confectionary birth very intensely. And managed to avoid every question her mother had asked about it by the way!

Now, she was waiting for any moment that her and Chaewon were alone, hopefully working up the courage to hand it over. And Hyejoo couldn't help but hold on to a little bit of hope that Chaewon had gotten her a gift too.

As soon as the last stray child finds a place to sit, the lights are cut. Laser beams suddenly protrude from a corner in the gym where the students can barely make out Secretary Yongsun controlling the buttons with an agitated face. The electronic notes of the Chicago Bulls intro song starts blasting through the speakers, startling the crowd of kids and faculty.

"What is going on?" Chaewon questions, only to have the rest of the girls shrug back at her.

The emergency doors on the other end of the gym fly open, and in comes the Principal on...

"A *donkey*?" Yeojin says aggressively "What the fuck. She stole my bit."

"Your bit?" Choerry asks sitting right next to her, eyebrows furrowed.

"Yes. My first headlining show as a mega-star, like Jesus, I would ride in on a donkey..." Yeojin explains. "I have to say though, I respect the move. I'm not even embarrassed, look at her go."

Haseul was, indeed, riding on a donkey and was slowly moving the animal towards the stage. The woman was wearing a pantsuit covered in pink little hearts. Students were trying their best not to laugh, and most teachers had their hands over their faces. All except for one very amused art teacher, who was smiling at her boss' antics.

"WHAT'S UP ST. JIHYO'S!!" Haseul's voice blares through the speakers and over the already loud hype music. She's wearing a small microphone taped to her face like she's about to give a Ted Talk. "HAAAAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY! ARE YOU READY TO RUMBLE!?"

No one in the crowd responds, minus a few whoops and hollers here and there. The donkey reaches the bottom of the stage and everything stops abruptly, the lights going on and the music cutting out.

Haseul struggles extremely as she tries to make her way off of the donkey, which is now walking in the reverse direction. She ends up just sliding off of it awkwardly onto the floor. The woman regains her composure and tilt-waves to the crowd as if she were the pope.

"HILLARY YOU SHOULD HAVE WON THE PRESIDENCY!" Yeojin screams from the audience, and Haseul sends a warning look back her way as she heads to the podium.

"Helloooo everyone! Welcome to the Valentine's Day assembly! Today-"

"*AHEM!*"

Haseul looks down at Nayeon standing at the bottom of the stage stairs. Haseul had promised the girl she could sing the national anthem at every school event for the rest of the year and in return, Nayeon promised not to sue the school for Hyejoo breaking her face. Haseul was hoping that her extravagant entrance would take her mind off of that idea. Instead, Nayeon was glaring at her, expectantly.

Haseul sighs deeply in exaggeration directly into the microphone allowing the entire school to hear it on a high volume. “Please stand for our national anthem.” She mumbles.

Haseul walks to the side of the podium as the sour pre-teen struts to the microphone, taking it out of the podium stand. At first, all of the students stay in their seats, not knowing whether or not this was a joke.

Nayeon glares at the crowd. “Well STAND.” She barks, and the crowd stands.

“Oh brother.” Yeojin groans.

Nayeon starts, singing the song on key, making her way through it without any disruptions. Other than Haseul kneeling dramatically to emulate Colin Kaepernick.

“*Were so gallantly streaming...*” She continues. Suddenly, another voice is bellowing loudly in contrast over her soft nasal toned voice, audible even over the speakers.

“ANNNNNDDDD THE ROCKETS RED GLAAARRREEEE!” Yeri screeches from her position in the bleachers, the outburst suddenly gaining the attention of the entire school. She moves down a step, singing directly towards Nayeon.

The student council vice president sends daggers at the shorter girl while continuing the sing. She then points at her mic, then points up frantically.

“Who is this bitch telling to turn her mic up to? There’s no one controlling levels.” Chaewon whispers, causing Hyejoo to giggle.

“THE BOMBS *BURSTING* IN AiiiiRRRRR,” Yeri scream sings as she proceeds to walk down the bleachers, surprisingly on pitch as she moves her hands in an explosive motion to the word bursting. The scene is ridiculously cinematic, and no one can tear their eyes away.

“This is definitely going on YouTube later.” Yeojin says, her phone already out to record the girls having a sing-off in front of their eyes.

Yeri is now on the stage, strangling Nayeon to take the microphone from her, while the both of them continue to sing in the midst of the fight.

“How is any of this real.” Hyejoo says.

“*OHHhhHhH say does that star spangled bA-*”

Nayeon is cut off by Yeri hip bumping her out of center stage, successfully gaining mic control.

“*BAAAAANNEEER YET WAAAVE! For the laaaaaaaaa haaaa haaAAAnnnnnddd OF THE FREEEEEEEEEEEE!*” Yeri hits a high note effortlessly, even adding a whistle note, and the crowd cheers.

“*AND THE HOMEEEE OF THEEE BEEERRRRRRRAAAAAVEEEEE!*” Yeri finishes, Nayeon’s arms crossed next to her while the student body roars. The mean girl stomps off the stage as Yeri drops the mic and flips her hair. She poses as if fans are taking photos of her (which, as a matter of fact, some are).

Principal Haseul finally stands from her kneeling position and heads onto the stage, picking up the microphone and showing Yeri to the stairs. The girl retreats to her seat, getting pats on the back only to be swatted away by her interim bodyguard Johnny.

“Wow! WHAT a performance! Ladies, that was incredible!” She sends Yeri and a very upset Nayeon a thumbs up. “Everyone you can sit down now!”

The crowd sits, and Principal Haseul continues on.

“Today, I will be letting you wonderful children know what is going on festivity-wise as we celebrate this day of LOVE! No cap!” The students cringe and Principal Haseul’s word choice, but she keeps going.

“You will be having second and third period today as scheduled following this assembly, then lunch. Today’s menu consists of heart-shaped EVERYTHING! Yes, that includes the milk! Don’t ask how we did it! Haha... Seriously do not ask. It’s illegal.”

There are all types of worried looks on faculty faces, but Haseul continues. “After lunch, you will attend fourth and fifth period, then you will report to your homeroom to have your Valentine’s day party! Teachers may play music and or put on a movie selected by the students. PG-13 maximum rating, aw that sucks.” The principal sends the students a thumbs down.

“Our annual St. Jihyo’s Valentine’s grams will be distributed here shortly, but please do not open them until aaaaafter school!

“But before that I would like to honor our boys basketball team! Tomorrow, they will be playing against Stray Kids Relief School For The Homeless in the CATHOLIC SPORTS CHAMPIONSHIPS!”

The crowd cheers loudly, all for Yeojin, Yeri, Chaewon and Hyejoo who aren’t even paying attention. A small diverse group of little middle school boys in matching warm-ups jog up to the stage, Chad leading the pack.

“Let’s have our captain, CHAD, say a few words!” Principal Haseul says with a giant smile, then hands over the mic to the adjacent eighth grader who is already taller than her.

“Yo.” Chad heavily breathes, the microphone way too close to his mouth. “Alright uh- Y’Ardy now the team has come so far we started strong and came out on top-”

“EUUUUUUEEHGGHH,” Yeojin violently writhes from the bleachers as she pretends to vomit, breaking the silence of the completely quiet audience. Chad glares up at her from his place on stage.

The lanky eighth grade boy continues addressing the crowd. “I just wanna dedicate this championship game to my girlfriend Choerry.”

The entire school does a unified Awwwww , as the pink-haired student body president blushes furiously and forms a heart with her hands towards her boyfriend. Her friends groan in unison, Yeojin and Yeri rolling their eyes at each other, but Choerry remains just as bright as the pink corduroy jacket she has on.

“Also I love God... Lebron 3:16. And my dad. But not my mom, ‘cause she’s a bitch,”

“Woaaaaah-” Principal Haseul starts with an alarmed expression.

“Anyway fam... Here is my speech.” Chad pulls out a crumpled up piece of paper and opens it.

“You know, we are gonna try our best in there and if we don’t it matters because there are losers and there are winners and participation is key, if you fit in the court you gotta stay in the court like

they say you can't maintain that drive if you don't go for the layup which is exactly what we plan to do-”

“Oh my God, this is worse than popcorn reading with Chaewon.” Yeri whispers.

“You are a football field and again. Don’t give up. Figure out how to fail. The elevator won’t stop until it’s over. How you respond to take the ball. In regards to the basket, I think if we keep dribbling with our eyes on the bucket, we can keep the focus on the goal. Which is not a goal, that’s where soccer is and we don’t play that, we play the sport for men. Which includes the ball and the jerseys running it back chest pass bounce pass over the head as long as it’s going to the player and the pivot is firm.”

“He sounds like predictive text,” Hyejoo whispers and Yeojin is doing everything in her power to hold it together. At this point, there are tears coming out of her eyes, and her nostrils are flaring as she coughs trying not to laugh too loudly.

“People often say that motivation doesn’t last. Well, neither does bathing. It is not about the feet and it never was. It ain’t over till it’s over. The five S’s of sports training are: stamina, speed, strength, skill, and never left the killer instinct to play your head hanging down. The three W’s of winning are women, whiskey, and willis. Bruce Willis. The mind can envision the loss. It is not the circumcision of the racetrack, but the endurance of the. The. You. Me. We. Kobe. We will never lose because this is anything but a game. Strap on those Nikes and run. Adidas hurt my feet. Bomboclaat.”

Chad folds the paper carefully and stuffs it in his pocket. “GO SAINTS!” he roars.

The audience bursts into applause, and Yeojin doubles over onto the bleacher letting all her laughter out. Haseul takes the mic back from Chad, holding it a little bit further from her than she was before.

“Wo-ow Chad!” she shouts over the applause. “You are quite the visionary! I didn’t understand most of that! Or any of it! But I’m sure it was moving!” She says. “Now we will have Father Alfred bless the team for their game to-”

Haseul is interrupted by Mrs. Yongsun running up to her and whispering in her ear. Haseul scrunches her eyebrows together and grinds her teeth as if to say ‘Yikes.’ The secretary walks back off stage and Haseul turns back to the crowd.

Her daughter in the bleachers finally stands, wiping her eyes of the tears that had fallen after laughing. “Whew, whew whew, okay I’m good. There is no way this assembly can get any better.”

Secretary Yongsun walks back off stage and the principal turns back to the crowd.

“Father Alfred has been hit by a car,” Haseul says gravely. The crowd of students and faculty collectively gasp in horror. “He will not be able to make it. So according to the rules of Jesus... I will serve in place for him as today’s priest, and conduct the blessing our basketball team.”

“I will just do the Lord’s Prayer...” Haseul says closing her eyes. “Everyone, please extend your right hand to our basketball team...”

All the middle schoolers in the bleachers do so, while the basketball boys bow their heads with closed-eyes.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name....”

Haseul continues on.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done....” Suddenly, she hesitates.

What was the next line? She opens one eye to see the crowd looking back at her expectantly.

“Um... I must confess... you lookin’ fresh?” She says, peeking at the crowd for approval. *“Yup, I’m impressed.”* Haseul says confidently in a priest like manner. “Go ‘head and flex.”

“Flex, turn up.” Chaewon whispers quietly.

Choerry looks over at her friends quizzically. “Fifth Harmony?” she mouths quizzically.

The principal is most certainly monotonously reciting the lyrics to “Reflection” by Fifth Harmony with a bit of beat in her flow. *“Everybody be hating the way that you stealin’ the show. ‘Cause ooh you be killin’ ‘em just like Lil Terio.”*

“Girls.” Ms. Wong warns from the end of their bleacher, as Yeojin spurts out another suppressed laugh behind her hand.

“Ooh you can get it-” Haseul snaps her finger. *“Anything you want.”*

“Anything you want.” Chaewon whispers again.

“And can’t nobody,” Yeri mouths quietly with closed eyes while bouncing her little shoulders to the silent beat.

Haseul never finishes, as she suddenly allows for a long pause.

Then, randomly, she returns to the actual Lord’s Prayer, as if she finally remembered the words. *“And lead us not in temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.”*

“What the fuck was that,” the girls hear someone nearby in the bleachers say.

Haseul bows ceremoniously, and the students slowly roll into thunderous applause. The basketball team says their very deep “Thank you, Principal Haseul”s, and steps down from the stage to sit on the gym floor.

“Alright SAINTS! Now gram distribution is going to be a little different this year...” Before anyone can even respond to the principal’s words, the woman pushes a remote button on the podium that sends thousands of little bags filled with candy crashing to the floor, a majority of them hitting the principal and the basketball team members. They all scream as candy grams pelt them in the head, some with enough gravitational force to warrant a concussion.

Haseul had the giant balloon cage by the ceiling filled with every single one of the Valentine’s grams. No one had even noticed at all because of how decorated the ceiling was with streamers.

Yeojin is holding her stomach as she laughs even more, distorting the giant image of Sean Paul’s face printed on her shirt.

Once all the candy is on the ground, Haseul stands up and dusts herself off. “I miscalculated the trajectory of those... but students! Please come forward and gather all your grams! Also, I *will* know if you took one that isn’t yours. I put a GPS in every bag because Irene thought stealing would be an issue... Dig in!”

Soon enough, students are bursting out of the bleachers, clamouring around each other excitedly,

trying to find their grams.

“YEE!” Yeojin screams, as she follows the rest of the student body, Choerry jumping down behind the shorter girl. Yeri simply struts down to the floor and has Johnny pick up her grams for her, leaving Hyejoo and Chaewon alone in the bleachers.

“This is so dumb right.” Chaewon says, chuckling nervously, looking at the crowd of kids bumping into each other as they look through gram labels. She plays with the sleeves of her light yellow sweater, white converse bouncing on the bleacher in front of her.

“Yeah everyone that goes here is stupid.” Hyejoo says, watching as Chad and a lanky kid named Joshua fight over one bag that clearly says Joshua.

“No I mean... this whole day. You know? Being in love or whatever and then giving people gifts because of it. I mean that’s kind of garbage really.” Chaewon says, shaking her head.

It should be noted that Chaewon had thought about giving Hyejoo something today. Actually, she thought about it long and hard for several hours. The two eighth grade girls had, of course, shared gifts before. But the thought of giving Hyejoo something on *Valentine’s Day*... It was just too much for the small blonde.

But in the end, she and Hyejoo were just best friends and that would be weird to give her something today... right?

Especially if it weren’t reciprocated.

Chaewon might be mistaken, but she thinks she sees Hyejoo’s shoulder’s slump a little.

“Uh yeah, garbage.” Hyejoo says, feeling the now pointless macaron box in her pocket once more.

“But we can still eat candy!” Chaewon says, trying to get Hyejoo’s energy back up. “Let’s go!” Taking her best friend’s arm, they hop off the bleachers and into the ocean of grams together.

Their principal is off the stage now, watching proudly as kids look desperately through the candy bags when she is approached by her favorite coworker. The art teacher wears a plain white cardigan over a pastel pink dress, chromatically complementing the Haseul’s heart-printed suit.

“Great assembly Principal.” Vivi says, getting a ridiculously goofy smile in return. The teacher’s heart jumps slightly at the sight, but she thinks nothing of it, only smiling back.

“Thanks! I was going to make the staff dig for their grams too, but Irene said I couldn’t. Something about the 7th grade Social Studies teacher being in a wheelchair. Real bummer in my opinion.” She says shaking her head.

Vivi shakes her head with her, smiling a little to suppress a giggle. The teachers had gotten their grams delivered to their cubbies this morning. Vivi received the obligatory gram from the school, a few from loving students, but also one anonymous extra from a very mysterious sender with no name.

Vivi wishes she knew the name of whoever gifted the gram, because it was one of the sweetest messages she had ever received in her life.

Not that it mattered at all though. Vivi’s heart was sort of occupied with someone else already...

Nate. Vivi had reassured herself when she thought about it. *Just Nate, for sure.*

“So,” Haseul says, snapping Vivi out of her thoughts. “Any Valentine’s Day plans? I’m sure… Nathaniel has something great set up for you.”

Vivi swears Haseul has a little bit of bitterness in her voice saying her boyfriend’s name, but she instantly dismisses it and blames it on the noisy students in the gymnasium. Her eyes droop slightly, remembering her activities for the night.

“No, actually,” Vivi says, “He has to work so I’ll just be eating in tonight. Maybe have some wine and paint or something.”

Haseul grows a pout on her face that makes Vivi’s stomach drop. “That’s no fun.”

“No, it’s okay, really. I like to be alone sometimes.” Vivi says, not lying. If she was being honest, she could only take so much of Nate. She figures that’s only normal for relationships, to want and have a little space from each other. (Whether or not “a little” is actually so is something Vivi refuses to let herself worry about right now.)

“Well then, I hope you have a great time alone!” Haseul says a little too happily for the sentence.

“I’m sure you’ll have a great time tonight with the kids,” Vivi says amusedly, referring to the fact that Choerry, Yeri, Hyejoo, and her own daughter Chaewon are going home with Haseul and Yeojin after school for a Valentine’s Day sleepover.

“Oh, yeah,” Haseul laughs. “Just me and the girls!”

The principal leans in closely so that Vivi can hear her at a whisper level. “Do you want to go to the cafeteria and see the heart-shaped milks?”

Vivi laughs, trying not to blush at their proximity, at Haseul’s fruity scent. “I would love to see them, but what about all the kids?”

Haseul looks back at the chaos of children still looking through the candy.

“Honestly, this is going to take them the rest of the day. I may not have thought this through. But Yongsun can handle them!”

The women look back at the secretary who is just lying flat on the floor in her corner.

Vivi tilts her head and looks back at Haseul. “Alright. Lead the way.”

With that, the two women exit the gym together.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay without us, sweetie?” Jungeun Kim says to Choerry’s forehead and brown eyes through FaceTime, while Jinsol loads the last of their belongings into the white Tesla. It’s just before noon now, and the couple is about to depart from their seaside villa for a few days to a destination Jinsol has very secretively refused to disclose.

A few days ago, Jinsol cryptically insisted that Jungeun take Friday, the weekend, and Monday off together with her for a trip, much to Jungeun’s surprise. For once, they weren’t just having some expensive rooftop dinner. Jungeun isn’t complaining, though!

Jinsol had planned it all out. In fact, she’d told Choerry about her little surprise for Jungeun which

made them both ecstatic. Choerry would stay with her grandma for the long weekend, while her mothers were off on their romantic getaway.

"I'm gonna be fine! Don't worry about me," Choerry says through the phone. "I'm gonna have fun at Yeojin's today, and Grandma said she'd bring me banana bread when she picks me up tomorrow!"

"Alright," Jungeun flashes an unconvinced, worried expression as the wind blows through her hair. "If for a second something is wrong I need you to call us, okay?" the shorter woman says, and Jinsol softens at the sound while she arranges belongings in the trunk. The pair are so adamant that their daughter is in a safe and loving environment that it's especially hard to let go, even if just for roughly 72 hours.

"Okay," Choerry says, and Jinsol comes up to join the conversation after shutting the trunk.

"I'll miss you baby," Jinsol sings while looking at Choerry's eyes crease into a smile on FaceTime.

"I'll miss you too," Choerry chirps with her same signature giggle that she's had since she was born, and Jungeun's heart melts at the sight.

"We'll text you as soon as we get there, okay?" Jinsol says, extra mindful of the anxiety Choerry might experience from them taking a weekend away. "I made sure we have cell service. If you need anything just call-"

"Okay okay! I need to go now, Yeri's trying to climb on top of the lunch table's umbrella- AAAH! Bye! I love you! Have fun be safe AAAH YERI NO-" A blurry Choerry squeaks before the video chat cuts.

"I love you too-" Jungeun and Jinsol can barely say before it does.

Jungeun wonders with furrowed brows what the hell Irene Kang's one and only Yeriana was doing but she just prays her daughter's friend doesn't end up with brain damage.

"Ready?" Jinsol asks her wife as they stand together in their driveway, embraced by beachside breeze. The Tesla is now fully loaded and ready to go.

"Where are we going again?" Jungeun asks with a smile as she walks over to the passenger door. They come around to either side, and get in. Even their casual attire is expensive.

Jinsol rolls her eyes playfully while climbing into the driver's seat. "I said it was a secret!"

When Jungeun is settled in her seat, Jinsol leans over to grab a fleece blanket from the back seat and immediately drapes it over her wife for the long drive to come while Jungeun thanks her. Then, she comes closer to start tying a black blindfold around Jungeun's eyes.

"What the hell are you doing," Jungeun whispers.

"It's a secret," Jinsol whispers back like a child.

"...Are you gonna kill me?" Jungeun asks seriously.

"What! No!" Jinsol pecks at her wife's lips as she finishes tying the cloth. She squeezes Jungeun's hand. "Just trust me, okay?"

Jungeun leans back into her seat, now with no sense of sight. “Okay,” she smiles, a bit more apprehensive than excited.

“You’re gonna love it,” Jinsol says promisingly as she starts up the car, and the two take off into the ocean breeze, headed up toward the mountains.

“I thought you said you lived in a rundown shack.”

The group of middle school friends were currently sitting a little cramped for space in bright orange Haseul’s Kia Soul. They had been driving since school had ended and were now approaching the Jo household, their sleepover spot for the night.

“This is a perfectly fine home?” Yeri continues, looking at the normal house in a relatively suburban area.

“That’s what I thought!” Chaewon chimes in.

“Yeah, why did you compare it to an abandoned crack house? It looks nice.” Hyejoo remarks as Haseul pulls into the driveway.

“YOU WHAT?” Haseul brings the car to a halt, looking over at her daughter in the passenger seat.

“I have an image to protect. Who’s going to take my threats seriously if I say I live on the set of *Modern Family*?” Yeojin responds as if it was the most obvious answer in the world.

“Who exactly are you threatening?”

“The HATERS Mom... God.” Yeojin huffs and opens the door to step out of the car.

Haseul takes a breath before speaking. “Okay everyone we have arrived at *The Feminest*! You can get your things out of the trunk!”

The girls stumble out of the back seat, the hot sun beating down on their skin as they move to the trunk to pull out their school items. Backpacks and duffles are thrown over shoulders, and each kid takes out their gift bags holding their Valentine’s Day grams. Well, except for Yeri, who’s amount of grams could not fit into one paper bag. She drags the small trash bag filled with candy out of the car, and onto the gravel.

“I still don’t get how you got that many,” Chaewon remarks, “Choerry didn’t even get that much.”

The girls look over at Choerry’s bag which, filled to the brim, is still no match for Yeri’s plethora of valentines.

“Well I don’t need lots of grams, because I have the only valentine that matters right here!” Choerry smiles, pulling out a pink plastic Kit-Kat bag that anyone could pull from a Wal-Mart shelf.

Chad had filled out the pre-made “To” and “From” label on the corner of the bag sloppily in red sharpie. It was smudged, so the girls had to squint in order to make out the message.

“Ew. I hate gay people.” Hyejoo says. (She had been picking up on some new high schooler phrases ever since she started letting Hyunjin play video games with her.)

“That doesn’t... Make sense in this situation...” Choerry defends.

“It’s still GROSS.” Yeojin says, grabbing her own little bag from inside the car. “But not as gross as Yeri having ten *billion* new admirers.”

“It’s not my fault I’m famous now.” Yeri remarks, flipping her hair.

The girls all collectively groan as Choerry reaches up to close the trunk. The gang of middle schoolers wait for each other before collectively walking towards the house.

Haseul unlocks the door, standing proudly to the side. “Welcome to *The Feminest!* That’s what I named the house when-”

“Okay HGTV let’s keep it moving, I have to take a shit.” Yeojin says, pushing past her mother and running inside. The girls follow, Choerry stopping in front of Haseul.

“This place seems lovely Principal Haseul!” The class president says genuinely.

Haseul smiles and bows dramatically, gesturing for Choerry to enter the house.

The sun glistens off the white curtains as they usually do, the floors creaking excessively as the five girls enter the lovely house.

“Girls, if you can just leave your bags here, I can take them up to Yeojin’s room for you.” Haseul puts her hand on one side of her mouth, as if she’s telling them a secret. “I’ve actually been trying to work on my arms recently, but my weights from Amazon haven’t gotten here yet, so I’ve been carrying random things up the stairs. Let me tell you, *never* try to lift 10 McRibs and a filled humidifier at the same time. Trust me.”

The middle schoolers look at her questionably before dropping their bags. Haseul fist pumps into the air, running over to fit everything into her arms.

“I’ll be back in a minute! Hehehehehe.” Haseul shouts giddily and the girls watch as she struggles up the stairs trying not to drop anything.

The group’s attention from Haseul’s trek to the second floor is interrupted when Yeri starts laughing from a few feet away.

“Guys come here,” the diva in the making says, and Choerry, Chaewon and Hyejoo gather around her and begin to snicker.

The sounds of a toilet flushing and a running faucet are heard and Yeojin steps out of a bathroom in a secluded hallway. She flings her bucket hat onto a little key table nearby, smoothing out her Sean Paul graphic tee and adjusting her plaid pants.

“Dude, those Valentine’s brownies go *THROUGH* me. On God.” Yeojin says, realizing that her family photos were on the wall and had been found by her group of friends.

“Awwwww look baby Yeojin.” Choerry says, smiling up at a picture of Yeojin being held by Haseul, her tiny foot in her mother’s face.

“You were so cute. What happened?” Yeri says, earning her a slap on the arm.

“Fuck you, my life’s a movie. And I’m Angelina Jolie.” Yeojin replies, crossing her arms.

Suddenly, something catches Yeri’s attention in her peripheral vision. She turns to look out through the blinds of the glass door, out at the swimming pool with something... swirling about, making

the water swish underneath the pool cover, and *Oh my God-*

“OH MY GOD. SHARKIRA?!?!” Yeri screams, getting the attention of the four other girls as well as she sprints over to the glass door. Yeri slides it open so forcefully that it bounces off the frame.

“SHUT UP YOU STUPID BITCH, MY MOM DOESN’T KNOW SHE’S IN THERE.” Yeojin hisses, running straight through the hanging blinds to follow Yeri out into the backyard. The other girls, frankly very confused, follow close behind.

Yeri lifts the pool cover slightly, peeking into the water. The girls gather around and are startled when Yeri gasps dramatically. Swimming in the water peacefully is a young tiger shark, the same one Yeojin and Yeri had stolen from the Aquarium of the Pacific. Choerry gasps in realization.

“Hi my little baby girl, you look so good yes you do come on now QUEEN!” Yeri coos at the little shark circling the pool.

Chaewon, Hyejoo, and Choerry just stare with dropped jaws.

“You guys?!?” Choerry says in a very panicked tone. “You cannot put a shark in *CHLORINATED WATER!* How has he even survived this long?? Please get him out of there right now! Oh God, what if he’s like mutated or something, oh God when my mom finds out she’s never going to let me come to your house again...”

“First of all, Sharkira uses she/her pronouns so please apologize.” Yeojin jokes, clearly understanding that Choerry would be more knowledgeable on the shark’s gender than she would. However, her smirk wavers once she sees that Choerry is filled with genuine concern.

“Hey. Relax.” Yeojin says. “I emptied the pool a long time ago and filled it up with regular hose water. Plus the pool is heated so I can keep it at an average temperature. I’m stupid but I’m not a dumbass. I googled how to take care of a shark.”

“Okay GOOD.” Choerry says quite dramatically while Yeojin rolls her eyes, shoving the other girl playfully.

“SOoOOoOooooO!” An elongated vocal run is heard approaching them from inside the house. Yeri basically slams the pool cover back down, just in time for Haseul to step out into the backyard.

“Are you wild child hungry? Do you want me to warm up some Totino’s for you?” Haseul asks, leaning against the doorframe.

“Actually yeah that sounds bomb as fuck.” Yeojin replies.

“Language. But okay, I’ll get those ready for ya!” Haseul is about to go back inside, but then turns back around.

“Wait what were you guys looking at out here? Did you want to get in the pool? I mean it’s a little cold but it is heated, I think I’d have to clean it really quick but then we could all-”

All the middle schoolers shout a different variation of “NO!” at once.

“Alright! Tough crowd, ahaha...” The principal scratches her head.

“We were just going to come inside and play the PS4. Right?” Choerry chirps, looking back at her friends after offering an excuse. The girls nod.

“Oh. Well I came up with a pretty good synchronized swimming routine if you guys change your minds!” Haseul says retreating inside the house, and the middle schoolers following right behind.

“*YEOJIN LET GO OF THE VENDING MACHINE!*” Hyejoo shouts.

Yejin’s little orange character holds onto a virtual snack dispenser for dear life. Hyejoo’s small black character is trying its hardest to drag Yeojin into the arena’s train tracks.

The girls were now huddled around the living room playing *Gang Beasts* , munching on some of Yeri’s Valentine’s Day candy as they wait for Haseul.

“*YOU’D LIKE THAT WOULDN’T YOU. YOU SICK MONSTER.*” Yeojin screams back, chewing on a Kit-Kat and holding the controller so tightly that her knuckles were turning white.

“Why isn’t anyone going after Choerry?! She’s literally just crawling up the wall!” Yeojin points out.

Choerry’s small pink character is indeed slowly making her way up the arena’s subway wall.

“I’m like Spiderman. SpiderGIRL.” Choerry squeals giddily.

“Yeri, we can talk about this.” Chaewon says, making her small green character kick and punch as Yeri’s purple one carries her over to the tracks. It has no effect and a train horn sounds from the arena. Yeri flings her into the tracks.

“Bye whore.” Yeri responds, muffled from a Fun Dip stick hanging out of her mouth as the game’s train comes and takes Chaewon out.

“*FATALITY.*”

The girls turn towards the living room entrance where Haseul is walking towards them, juggling a giant pan of food. Haseul places the dish down, wiping the sweat from her forehead with her giant *Winnie The Pooh* oven mitts.

“Bonealpacafeet!” She says ripping the lid off the pan.

The girls look into the dish and see something that is definitely not pizza rolls. It looks like a mix of oatmeal and lasagna. Chaewon has to make a sweater paw and cover her mouth to keep from gagging.

“What the hell is this.” Yeojin asks point blank. The food is most definitely not anything resembling Totino’s pizza rolls.

“What do you mean? This is Totino’s!?” Haseul responds.

“No, this is the vomit under a New York subway seat. Where are the pizza rolls?”

“OHHHHHHHHH.” Haseul says, giggling. “No, not the pizza rolls. This is *Totino’s* . Our neighbor, Totino! He gave us some!”

“Um... That’s okay Principal Haseul, we can just eat my candy.” Yeri says, pouring out the rest of her Valentines onto the floor.

“Yeah it will hold us over until dinner... Thanks though!” Choerry says, covering the pan back up

and picking up a Kit Kat.

“Oh... alright!” Haseul says. “I’m going to go finish up some work then okay?” Haseul asks and the girls nod. She takes the dish and heads to the other room.

“Your mom’s a little crazy.” Yeri says.

“Yeah,” Yeojin nods in agreement. “But also like never call her that again or I’ll fucking kill you.” No one is allowed to make fun of Haseul other than herself, after all. The small girl hits resume on the game and brings everyone’s attention back to the TV.

“SNORT IT. SNORT IT.”

It had been around two hours since the middle schoolers had opted to eat the candy rather than Totino’s and things had definitely escalated. (Mostly just the kids’ blood pressure.)

Wrappers littered the floor as Choerry, Yeri, Hyejoo and Chaewon stand over Yeojin. Well, standing may not be the best word. The girls were nearly hitting the ceiling, bouncing on the scattered couch cushions and staying within the proximity of Yeojin. The mallest friends had just crushed up the last Smarties package and had it laid out on the coffee table like a line of cocaine.

“NO DON’T!” Choerry screams, her jacket now wrapped around the waist of her light blue jeans as she feels her body overheat from the sugar high. “YOUR SINUSES!”

“WHAT DID YOU JUST CALL ME?” Yeojin asks, clearly trying to stall from snorting the sugar.

“You’re a little BITCH.” Hyejoo says, roughly pushing Yeojin over and leaning down to snort the sugar herself. “WOO!” Hyejoo screams, going to the floor and doing one individual push up. She then sprints full force out to the backyard, her oversized jacket flapping in the wind she’s created.

“WHAT THE HELL?” Yeojin shouts, getting up to chase Hyejoo down, the rest of the girls not far behind.

The girls get outside in time to see Hyejoo climbing up the gutter to the roof.

“OLIVIA, NOOOO!” Choerry yells.

“OLIVIA YEEES!” Chaewon whoops.

Hyejoo reaches the roof and starts popping to a beat that no one else can hear.

“AmIhigh?Isthiswhatbeinghighfeelslike?Iloveithere.” Yeri says so quickly that none of the other girls even catch what she’s said.

Suddenly, Hyejoo loses her balance slightly, making her fall on her side. She feels the box with her valentine’s macaron smash in her jacket pocket. The girls below her gasp, but all Hyejoo can do is laugh.

Of course this would happen, Hyejoo thinks to herself. Destroying Chaewon’s gift out of her own dumb actions was the icing on her nonexistent heart-shaped cake. Even if she hadn’t planned on giving it to her anymore, she sure as shit wasn’t going to be able to do so now.

Honestly, if she hadn’t just snorted a line of pure sugar, she might’ve started crying in the middle of the roof. At this moment though, she can’t stop laughing maniacally.

“OLIVIA WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Yeojin screams from the ground.

“LOVE ISN’T REAL!” Hyejoo shouts back before putting her hands down on the roof and morphing her body into a handstand.

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?” Yeojin yells.

The backyard door swings open and Principal Haseul is out on the lawn, looking up at the girl on the roof in horror.

“Oh I’m absolutely going up there PARKOUR.” Yeri says quickly, but no one seems to hear her.

“Hyejoo! Haha... please get down sweetie!” Haseul says nervously.

“When love comes back down to this earth, maybe then I will come down with it.” Hyejoo responds eerily.

“Oh gosh.” Choerry says, looking at Chaewon, who is just giggling at Hyejoo’s antics, clearly oblivious.

“HYEJOO... If you fall down I will go to the exact spot where you will land just before you get there. I took a physics class, you know. So that way you won’t kill yourself, but instead you’ll kill me on impact, and you know what that will make you? A MURDERER. YOU’RE NOT A MURDERER!” Haseul screams to the eighth grader on top of her house, trying to reason.

“YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT I’M CAPABLE OF!” Hyejoo responds jokingly, but her handstand is clearly becoming a little unsteady.

“Okay, you know what, stay there I’m coming up!” Haseul shouts, starting to take off her shoes, as if that will help her stability.

“NO. Last time you went up there you made a hole and a bird pooped in our house for WEEKS.” Yeojin says, putting an arm on her mother.

“GUYS IT’S FINE.” Yeri says in a language unknown to anyone below her, already on the roof.

“HOW THE HELL DID YOU GET UP THERE?” Yeojin screams. “AND I DIDN’T KNOW YOU COULD SPEAK JAPANESE??”

“I DIDN’T EITHER. DOESN’T MATTER THOUGH! I GOT HER.” Yeri shouts back down.

The girl walks over to Hyejoo and throws the girl over her shoulder. “How are you this strong?”

“I’ve been training for the day I have to face my mom in the ring.” Yeri replies dramatically with no further explanation, not specifying at all which mother she is even referring to. But soon enough, the crazy kids are back safely on the ground, still jittering.

“Thank god. I could not last on that roof, I’m not going to lie to you. Might just have jumped off myself. Like just to say I did. Wait that’s problematic.” Haseul says.

“MRS. JO. YOU’RE SO FUNNY.” Chaewon practically screeches into Haseul’s ear. It’s the loudest she’s ever heard the girl speak. “ARE YOU GONNA PARTY WITH US ALL NIGHT OR WHAT?”

Haseul smiles at the compliment but shakes her head. “Actually, I will not. I have plans for later.”

“OoOOoOo,” All the girls besides Yeojin say, getting closer to the woman in order to get the gossip.

“You have a date on Valentine’s Day?” Choerry asks, eyes dreamlike.

“Oh, haha, no.” Haseul says, a little embarrassed. She shakes it off.

“Something better actually... I have tickets... to *MA On Ice*!” She says enthusiastically.

The girls stare at her for a moment, and then they start giggling.

“WHAT IS *MA On Ice*?” Chaewon questions rather loudly.

“Hey don’t laugh! This is very serious! Octavia Spencer is actually in it. I’ve been planning it for months. I got the tickets all the way back in September! This is a huge deal!” Haseul says matter of factly.

“That good babysitter will be coming over to watch you while I’m gone. The one your mom rages about, Hyejoo.”

“*Hyunjin*?!” Hyejoo asks, unnerved by her worlds colliding. Haseul nods.

“*PERIOD*!” Chaewon whoops.

“Yes! EXCLAMATION!” Haseul responds. “She’ll be here in about an hour or so. Speaking of which! I should go get ready.” Haseul finishes, making her way back into the house.

Once she’s gone, Yeojin turns around to the rest of the girls. “Okay I cannot take this. There is no way I’m letting my mom go out alone on Valentine’s day,” the rapper whispers. “We have got to set her up with Mrs. Wong.”

The girls squint at her and tilt their heads. “What?” They all say in unison.

“You IMBECILES. Don’t you see?!? The way they look at each other... My mom’s terrible attempts at flirting... the constant laughter at my mom’s jokes even though she has the humor of both a senior citizen and a newborn baby...” Yeojin trails off.

“No way...” Chaewon says, “My mom is straight... Unless...?”

“No offense Chae but she definitely does get a little too close with Yeojin’s mom in the hallway now that I think about it,” Yeri inputs. “Plus, I stalked her on Spotify the other day and I saw *King Princess* on one of her playlists. There is just *no* way that woman is straight.”

“OH MY GOD.” Choerry says, her palm to her forehead. “THAT’S WHO HER GRAM WAS FOR!”

“Her gram?” Hyejoo asks.

“Who’s gram?” Chaewon asks.

“YES! IT ALL MAKES SENSE!” Choerry giggles maniacally, still giddy from the candy.

“Principal Haseul came up to the Valentine’s gram table earlier this week with one and told a horrible lie about how she didn’t make it. But she totally did! Of course it was for Ms. Wong!”

“My mom has a boyfriend,” Chaewon starts. “But I do hate him. I hate men.” Hyejoo takes the remark with wide, opportunistic eyes.

“Then it’s settled. We are *setting* them up!” Yeojin says. “Chae, call your mom and get her to come over. I bet we can convince them to go out once she gets here.”

“Okay okay.” Chaewon says, pulling out her phone. She taps on her contacts and then rings a number under the name of “Egg Hatcher.” After a few rings on speaker, Vivi picks up.

“*Hello?*” The gentle voice of the art teacher says on the other end of the line.

“Mom?” Chaewon says. Some of the girls giggle, and she swats at them.

“*Hi Wonnie! Aren’t you with your friends? Is everything okay?*”

“Uh... Yes... Um... NO!” Chaewon suddenly shrieks into the phone.

“*What?!*”

“EMERGENCY EMERGENCY COME GET ME THE HOUSE IS FALLING INTO... A PIT.” Chaewon screams dramatically looking around at her friends’ confused faces. She shrugs.

“*WHAT?!*”

“YEAH YOU BETTER HURRY! THERE ARE DRUGS! OH NO YERI IS TUMBLING DOWN.” Chaewon looks at Yeri and the girl makes ridiculous choking noises.

“*Oh my God?! I’m coming over there right now!*” Vivi shrieks.

“YEAH IT’S BAD PLEASE COME QUICK!” Chaewon yells. “Also don’t call Principal Haseul, her phone... fell into the pit already... OKAY BYE HURRY!”

With that, Chaewon hangs up the phone abruptly. “Period,” she says again, a completely calm tone.

“With traffic and everything she should get here before my mom leaves. Wow we are such MATCHMAKERS!” Yeojin says loudly, clearly still being affected by the candy and fist pumping like she’s at a *Jersey Shore* club.

“Speaking of making matches... I have another couple I want to add to the list.” Hyejoo says, pulling out her own phone.

Usually, this kind of thing would not interest the girl. She generally liked staying out of other people’s business. But because the sugar was still pumping adrenaline through her veins, (and because of her own failed Valentine’s Day,) Hyejoo thinks she should make herself useful during this glorious time of love.

“Anyone else want Heart Shaker’s Pizza?”

“Then she ate a literal tree branch, and I was like *Gahyeon*, that’s not how being vegan works.”

Hyunjin unlocks the door to her house, looking back at Lia to both let her inside and to signal her to go on with her story.

The head cheerleader walks through the door and Hyunjin follows, shutting it behind her. “So I promised to text her some recipes but honestly she’s a little clueless. I might just go over there and help her tomorrow.” Lia places her bag down near the door.

The girls had just gotten back from a Dalla High Friday night basketball game, now in an empty house due to both of Hyunjin's parents being out of town for the weekend. Under Hyunjin's big puffy letterman jacket, Lia was in her usual black, green and white cheer uniform. Hyunjin was wearing a basketball uniform of the same colors, her hair up in a braid that Lia had done for her earlier.

Hyunjin had ended up signing up for the varsity basketball team's try-outs, and no one was surprised when she made it. Hyunjin was an athletic superstar, voted most likely to be a future member of the USWNT, and it's not like she had much competition. (Ryujin was really the only one at that school near her level of athleticism, and her broken nose had prevented her from trying out. Or so the rumor goes...)

"You can come too!" Lia beams. "But only if you want," she says, with an uncharacteristic nervous hesitance.

Hyunjin looks back over to the girl, kicking off her slides. "Yeah, that sounds fun! Hold that thought though, I have to get all my shit ready so I can go babysit our little friends."

The cheerleader watches wistfully as the basketball player bounds up the steps to her room.

Lia had offered to take Hyunjin anywhere she needed to go while her car was being fixed for the week. (It had broken down when Hyunjin accidentally dropped an imported Parisian croissant into the gas tank.) Hyunjin had graciously accepted, only because their schedules were so similar. Which of course, made it so much easier to connect with each other. For the past month, they had been growing closer, hanging out every single chance that they could.

In terms of physical intimacy, nothing more had really happened since the party. But when it came to every day flirting, Hyunjin and Lia had become pros. The cheerleading captain was incessantly forward with Hyunjin, flirting nearly every waking hour of the day. But sometimes, Hyunjin would shamelessly reciprocate her signals, making Lia's stomach go haywire. Needless to say, there was tension of all sorts building between the two. Even Hyunjin's teammate Siyeon had started to tease them about their closeness.

Lia sighs and makes her way over to the couch to wait. She would be lying if she said she hadn't been wondering what it was that she and Hyunjin were doing. Especially on Valentine's Day, when couples were flaunting their relationship statuses everywhere she looked.

She doesn't care if the flirting meant nothing, or if it went anywhere. Even though she *did* have feelings for the girl at this point, Lia was having a perfectly dandy time just being friends with Hyunjin. Did she want something more? Maybe, but she also knew Hyunjin was still not over whatever it was she had going on with... *What was her name again?*

Eh, whatever. Lia thinks, but she knows she'd appreciate it if she knew what exactly Hyunjin feels towards her...

And Lia didn't know it, but Hyunjin had been thinking about it just as much as she was.

"Hey can you take this out for me? It was really pretty before the game but now... she's all over the place."

Lia is forced out of her thoughts when Hyunjin reappears at the bottom of the steps. The girl changed out of her basketball uniform, and is walking over towards the cheerleader in sweatpants and a t-shirt. She was referring to her braid, which had various strands sticking out sloppily.

“You look hot.” Lia says unabashedly.

“Well, I need to keep up with you, so.” Hyunjin sits down in front of her, cross legged with a smirk.

Lia smiles, taking her friend’s hair in her hands gently. She slowly unravels the complicated braid, a fancy one she knew how to do for Hyunjin thanks to all her years as a cheerleader.

Hyunjin relaxes as Lia works on the strands, falling into a comfortable, intimate silence. Hyunjin has to stop her shoulders from rising as Lia’s feather light touch sends electric shivers down her spine. The cheerleader works delicately, her heart skipping a beat as the girl in front of her complies quietly to her every move.

Eventually, Hyunjin feels the other girl’s hands leave her head.

“She’s out.” Lia says, and Hyunjin turns around so that she’s facing her.

“Thanks.” Hyunjin’s hair is down now, somehow falling in perfect waves onto her shoulders regardless of the intense match she had just finished performing.

Lia rolls her eyes smiling and the other girl pushes her playfully.

“What?” Hyunjin questions.

“You still look hot.”

The room is tense all of a sudden and Lia can’t stop herself from looking at her friend’s lips. She bites her own when she catches Hyunjin doing the same thing to her. Lia begins to lean in for a kiss.

It takes everything in Hyunjin to pull away. “Um, before we... I-I think we should talk.” Hyunjin says, already somewhat out of breath.

Lia’s stomach lurches. “Okay-”

“I just,” Hyunjin rubs her own knees nervously. “I don’t want to lead you on or anything because... I don’t know... just... The point is... I think I like you. Like, I *like you* , like you.” Lia’s eyes widen.

“And I know that’s super selfish of me to say,” Hyunjin continues, “Because honestly, I don’t know where I’m at with, you know... Everything that happened. And that’s really unfair to you. And even though I know I’m nowhere near being over the whole thing with my old friends... I know that I like being around you and you’re amazing. And attractive. Like, *really* attractive...”

“I just... had to say something before I let us do anything, because the last thing I want to do is hurt you. You’re really important to me, Lia... And I’m not trying to guilt you into staying here or anything, like, I totally get it if you want to go because of what I’m saying... but I don’t know... Maybe you talk now because I’m really bad at this.” Hyunjin finishes, hoping to God she made any sort of sense.

Lia takes in everything Hyunjin said. Of course, it stung a little, hearing Hyunjin say out loud that she wasn’t over the whole thing with Ryujin and... Helicopter? But it’s not like that’s new information, really. Maybe it was a good sign that Hyunjin is being so transparent and honest with her.

And maybe Lia is dumb for chasing something so uncertain. But looking into Hyunjin’s eyes right

now, knowing that she could finally receive the sort of relationship she had been craving from the girl ever since they had kissed at Ryu-jin's New Year's party... Lia doesn't care. If she gets hurt, well, *I think I can handle it*. Hyunjin had just laid all her feelings out, including the ones she had for Lia.

"I think I *like you* , like you too." Lia says, giggling a little at how elementary she sounded. "We don't have to put any labels on this. It can just be what it is, Hyunjin. Well, maybe with a little more of this..." Lia leans in and takes Hyunjin's lips in her own, lingering slowly before pulling back. Hyunjin's eyes flutter open and Lia smiles.

"I get it. There's no rush to even get to a place where we would be something else. I mean, obviously, I wouldn't mind if you wanted to start being... More. But I'm just glad I know how you feel." Lia says truthfully.

Hyunjin's eyes are still filled with concern. "Are you sure?"

Lia hated the question, because in reality, she had never been more *unsure* of anything in her entire life.

The one thing she was definitely sure about though, was that she wanted to keep kissing Hyunjin. "Yes."

With that, Hyunjin reaches for Lia's face, bringing their lips crashing together. Lia is practically melting into the girl as their mouths work against each other, however she remembers something that forces her to pull back.

"Wait, shouldn't I drop you off? You have to babysit soon!" Lia says, lowkey wanting to fight those kids at the thought of having to leave the girl in front of her right now.

Hyunjin checks her phone. "Well, if you let me drive, We still can still stay here for at least 10 more minutes..." The girl trails off.

"You can drive... as long as you don't put your bread in my gas tank." Lia says.

"That sounds wrong." Hyunjin smiles.

"Shut up." Lia laughs, laying back and pulling Hyunjin on top of her as they crash their lips together once more.

Jungeun wakes from her car nap to her ears popping. Instantly put off by the black blindfold still over her eyes, she notes the increasing altitude but is relaxed by the sound of her wife humming along to the car radio.

"Are we almost there?" Jungeun yawns, curled up in the passenger seat.

"Almost, honey."

Jungeun pouts. "Can I take this off now?"

"Nope." Jinsol had almost accidentally slapped Jungeun earlier when she saw her wife reaching to remove her blindfold. "But... Go ahead and put this on," the CEO says after some rustling, and Jungeun feels something dropped into her lap. She reaches for it, and feels the familiarity of one of her warmest fleece jackets.

“...We’re in the mountains, aren’t we?”

Jinsol just smiles, as the car traverses through the dark night.

“What time is it?”

“Just about nine in the evening.”

“...Can I look now?” Jungeun repeats like a child, antsy as ever.

“No!”

“You want me to put this jacket on but I can’t even see-”

“You are the smartest woman I know! Figure it out!” Jinsol whines.

Jungeun groans. But of course, she manages to get it on, even with a blindfold and seatbelt in the way.

When the Tesla eventually slows to a stop, Jungeun still isn’t allowed to take off her blindfold. So Jinsol comes to the passenger door to help her wife out of the vehicle, but despite her wife’s arms around her Jungeun is shaking from immediate exposure to frigid temperatures.

Disoriented, she feels her feet crunch through soft ground, and small icy nips at her face. “Oh my God Jinsol, is that snow?!”

“Shhh!” Jinsol says as she continues to walk Jungeun along, who can still only see complete darkness. The shorter woman’s heart beats faster in excitement; she hasn’t been in the snow in years. The married couple crunches along, Jinsol’s arms around her.

“Okay,” the CEO whispers, her breath visible in front of her. “You can look.” Nimble, freezing fingers work to undo the blindfold’s knot.

Jungeun simply can’t wait, and just lifts up the dark cloth to see for herself.

For the first time since the car ride began, she sees her surroundings.

Trees, endless, towering trees like Jungeun hasn’t seen in forever since she moved to the city - draped in the thick white blankets of settled snowfall, with more floating down as they speak. Black sky shines through, with countless twinkling stars across its breadth in close quarters with one another. The moonlight reflects glistening white branches, making the milky white snow of the clearing shine, and Jungeun’s breath is taken away.

“Happy Valentine’s day,” Jinsol plants a warm kiss on Jungeun’s cool cheek.

A very passionate “Wow” is all Jungeun can breathe out in response to the priceless, scenic winter night. “Where *are* we?”

“Not too far from home,” Jinsol looks up with the stars shining in her eyes through the light snowfall. “Just far enough.”

It’s quiet, perfectly quiet out in the dark forest as not even their familiar sounds of cars passing by or ocean waves are lingering in the background. Jinsol holds her wife closer, enveloping her from behind to keep their warmth, as Jungeun takes in the starry black sky with wonder.

“Do you like it?” Jinsol whispers in her ear.

“Yes,” Jungeun giggles, snuggling into Jinsol’s embrace. “You took me out to stargaze for Valentine’s Day?” Jungeun looks up with a delighted smile. This is *definitely* better than some fancy dinner.

“Turn around baby,” her wife says quietly.

Together, they turn, and Jungeun gasps at what’s in front of her.

A humble little cabin sits in the center of the snow-covered clearing. Overflowing with warm light through every one of its windows, the sleepy safe haven from the weather welcomes them in without even trying.

Before Jungeun can even properly respond verbally to her wife’s beautiful surprise, Jinsol peels herself off of her warm body and takes her hand. “Let’s go inside, it’s freezing,” Jinsol shivers as she brings Jungeun’s hand to her mouth to kiss. Snow crunches at the couple’s feet.

Jungeun is in awe of her wife, who is still full of surprises, even now. Never in a million years could she have anticipated something like *this* today, especially with her wife’s recent pattern of relatively small Valentine’s gifts. But all of that seems gone with the wind now, as Jinsol’s arm wraps around Jungeun lovingly as they walk into their weekend home together.

The thick wooden door creaks open to reveal a rustic living room with a crackling fire already going. Everything about the interior design looks like something out of a storybook. The quaint cabin is nothing like their oceanside home - it’s woodsy, old-fashioned, intimate, and just spacious enough to keep the two lovers comfortably close.

“I was thinking,” Jinsol starts nervously, playing with her hands just a little. “About how we have this big house... And it’s been a while since we’ve had everything to ourselves-”

“Jinsol, you- You didn’t have to,” is all Jungeun can shakily breathe out, overwhelmed and in shock.

“Yes, yes I did, honey,” the CEO responds gently as she turns to face her wife. She meets Jungeun’s shocked eyes. “I owe you a million of these vacations... And I want to give them all to you.”

Just a few months ago, Jungeun and Jinsol were so distant because of their workaholic lifestyles, quietly missing each other dearly without much time to give to each other. And now, it seems like they have all of the time in the world to make up for it and more. Jungeun looks away as her bottom lip begins to quiver because she refuses to let herself the pooling tears fall from her eyes.

Jinsol turns and notices her wife getting emotional. “No no no,” Jinsol cups Jungeun’s red, cold cheeks and gives her a forehead kiss with a little laugh. “No crying. Let me show you around?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer as she takes Jungeun by the hand again to lead her through the little wonders of the cabin - the cozy little bedroom with a smaller, king-sized bed, the deck in the back of the house with a bubbling blue hot tub, the spacious bathroom with a tub next to their beautiful mountainside view.

“How did you get all of this, honey?” Jungeun asks in astonishment as she looks out of the large bathroom’s window, gazing in awe at the moonlit snowy slopes of the nearby mountains. Behind her, Jinsol lights every little candle at the side of the tub.

When Jungeun turns to face her, Jinsol just gives her a bashful smile. “I made some calls,” she answers simply. “I’m gonna bring our bags inside, okay?”

Jungeun comes away from the window, because now her wife is doing too much. “No, let me help you-”

“No no no, baby,” Jinsol holds Jungeun’s hands to stop her. “I’m going to take care of you, okay?” she asserts in a gentle voice.

“But-”

“No buts,” Jinsol looks at her sternly, then melts into a soft smile as she rubs a thumb over the back of Jungeun’s palm. “Just let me.”

With one arm moving down to her wife’s waist, Jinsol uses the other to start running the water into the tub. It flows out steaming hot (just the way Jungeun likes it).

“Your only job is to relax,” Jinsol instructs.

“Jinsol...” Jungeun starts, then proceeds to look around the polished wood walls of the bathroom. “This is *beautiful*,” she breathes, then suddenly feels insecure in comparison. “My gift is *nothing* compared to-”

“Shhh, I don’t care if you gave me nothing at all,” Jinsol says as she pulls her wife in for a warm hug as the hot water fills the tub up beside them. “I’m glad you like it,” she whispers, smiling. “It’s all for you.”

When Jungeun’s clothes have already fallen to the floor, and her naked form is submerged in the steaming bath water, her wife comes in with two glasses of her favorite champagne.

Jungeun’s eyes widen as Jinsol leans against the tub’s rim and hands her wife a glass. “I feel like a queen,” Jungeun says in awe.

“That was the goal,” Jinsol looks at her wife lovingly for a few seconds, admiring her utterly timeless beauty in the candlelight. “And you are one,” Jinsol says truthfully, her face shining in the candlelight. Jungeun smiles at her wife just above the rosy water line.

Jinsol leans down to kiss her wife, and Jungeun’s rises from the water to cup Jinsol’s cheek when their lips meet. Jungeun’s hand moves to the back of her wife’s neck to desperately pull her closer. As if out of necessity, Jinsol parts their lips.

“Take your time,” she whispers, looking into her wife’s eyes - and inside them lies a deeper hunger. “Meet me in the living room when you’re done,” Jinsol gives Jungeun one more slow, chaste kiss. Then, she clinks their wine glasses together gently.

The dark-haired woman retrieves an elegant, rectangular gift box from the ground, and sets it down near Jungeun.

“You’re just gonna leave me in here alone?” Jungeun pouts, resting her glass at her side and hugging her knees to her bare chest under the water.

“Yes, this is You-time,” she smiles with eyes full of adoration. “I’ll see you in a bit baby,” Jinsol steps out of the wooden doorway, shutting the door quietly behind her.

All Jungeun can think is that this is the vacation she's always wanted.

Much later when the bathwater has finally run cold, Jungeun pads out of the tub and uses one of Jinsol's fluffy white towels to pat herself dry. When she's finished, she opens the gift box her wife left her and the sight takes her breath away.

Inside is a sinful two-piece set of deep red lingerie, the same color Jungeun wore for her on their wedding night. Underneath sits a darker, short satin robe folded neatly next to a small card.

In Jinsol's neat handwriting, it reads - **Wear this for me**

And in very small text under - **p.s. please but only if you want I love you**

Jungeun chuckles a little, then looks back at the lingerie with parted lips and a blush.

Without any hesitation, she sheds her towel to slip them on.

She spots Jinsol, gorgeous as ever, waiting patiently for her in the hall.

Jinsol stands in a black silk dress Jungeun has never seen before, and is staring at her stunning wife in the cozy cabin like she put all the stars in the sky. Jungeun, with wide eyes, is doing the exact same.

"Hi," Jinsol says.

"Hi," her wife whispers back.

Everything about the moment is so lullingly gentle, the dim cabin light above their head, the complete peace and quiet, the way the married women take each other in.

Jungeun finds herself walking towards Jinsol without even willing herself to; the magnetism simply undeniable.

Jinsol threads their fingers together with a smile. "You are so beautiful," she whispers.

Jungeun can't even formulate a response, as she takes in the entirety of Jinsol in that silk garment and almost stutters when she finally manages to return her loving words.

Wordlessly, Jinsol takes her by the hand, and guides her to the living room.

When they arrive, the fireplace is alive and inviting - and right beside it, something that was not there when they initially came in. A makeshift bed is laid out, a cushion covered in faux fur throws and other blankets for even more warmth should they sleep there during the night.

So this is what she was doing when I was in the tub, Jungeun realizes in shock. The amount of planning that must have gone into this, Jungeun can't even imagine.

Jinsol turns towards her wife in the firelight, and looks at her with so much love in her dark eyes that even despite all their years together Jungeun almost runs and hides from how exposed she feels. But Jinsol gazes upon her, the curve of her wife's jaw, the warmth in her cheeks. Careful fingers move fallen hair strands away from Jungeun's face.

“I want to take care of you, Jungeun,” Jinsol says softly, purposefully over the crackling fire. She pulls at one end of the binding satin ribbon agonizingly slowly, and Jungeun’s breath hitches as she feels her robe come undone. “Will you let me?”

Jungeun can only nod with hooded eyes in confirmation before surging forward to connect their lips.

Slow, yearning kisses possess them as Jinsol’s hands roam under Jungeun’s open robe to caress her exposed skin, from her soft stomach to her supple breasts over the lacy red. Jinsol adores Jungeun through her touch, and elicits the first of many high-pitched whimpers that night as her mouth simultaneously nips at the most sensitive spots of Jungeun’s neck.

Jinsol fully sheds Jungeun’s robe while trailing kisses from her collarbone to her chest. Jungeun’s shaky hot breaths intensify when her robe is completely off, and Jinsol moves to claim Jungeun’s nearly naked body as hers.

The desperate heat inside Jungeun, between her legs, is becoming overwhelming.

“Jinsol, please,” she begs desperately, wanting nothing more than to give her wife her body to touch and spoil. Jungeun gasps at Jinsol’s hands sinking to the back of her thighs and immediately lifting her up into her arms.

Jungeun kisses her, dizzied and delirious with all the love she has, as Jinsol sprawls her wife down on their bed to take.

Under the darkened sky, Vivi drives up to a house that is clearly not in a pit.

The art teacher pulls her trusty red convertible into the driveway of Haseul’s home. *The Feminest*, if she recalls correctly.

“Ugh, Chaewon.” Vivi says quietly to herself, realizing that her daughter played a prank on her and that she’s stupid for even considering that the house had actually fallen into a pit.

Vivi takes a deep breath, ready to shift gears and go back home. However, something tugs within her, making her hands sit unmoving at the steering wheel.

She should find out why Chaewon called her there in the first place right? To make sure she wasn’t in actual trouble? After all, she did sit through lengthy traffic to get here.

Plus, Vivi definitely wouldn’t mind saying hi to Haseul in the process.

She puts her car in park, unconsciously checking herself out in her car mirror before exiting the driver’s side door. Through the cool Valentine’s night air, Vivi walks up to the door and knocks a few times.

“*YEOJIN CAN YOU GET THAT?! I’M FLOSSING!*” Vivi can hear Haseul cry out from inside the house, and she can’t help but giggle. Soon enough, she can spot the little eighth grader peeping at her through the window curtain.

“Mademoiselle.” Yeojin says as she opens the door while bowing.

“Hi Yeojin.” Vivi says, bowing back to play along. “Are you going to tell me why you’re not in a pit right now?”

“Um... Haha... The thing about the pit...” Yeojin starts awkwardly, as the rest of her friends start to peek out from behind her, including Vivi’s own daughter. The woman raises an eyebrow at all of them.

“PITS? Do I need more deodorant? Wait who’s talking about pits-”

Haseul appears from the stairs within the house, her descent currently on pause as she sees her coworker at the door. She’s changed out of her heart suit from earlier and has put on something simpler - cuffed jeans, black booties, and a really well fitting red long sleeve that causes Vivi’s heart rate to amp up more than it already has. She blushes, suddenly feeling a little underdressed as she’s still wearing the same outfit from earlier.

“Vivi? What are you doing here?” Haseul asks as she resumes her walk down the stairs.

“The kids seem to have played a prank on me.” Vivi says, shrugging. She looks at her daughter with a warning look.

“Oops,” is all Chaewon has to say, not at all sounding sorry. The girl is surprised looking between the two educators, a clear tension between them that the whole room can feel. She’s a little unsure of what to think, but stops herself from thinking more of it.

“WELL, I mean now that you’re here... You guys should go out! No one should spend Valentine’s Day alone!” Yeojin suggests coyly, wiggling her eyebrows to encourage lesbianism.

The two older women look at each other shyly for a second before speaking, unexpectedly considering the offer, as the idea is more than appealing to both of them.

“...Who would watch you kids?” Vivi asks first and foremost.

“Principal Haseul already called my babysitter... She’s in high school.”

“The one who kidnapped you guys?” Vivi questions.

“MOM. I told you we weren’t kidnapped. It was a misunderstanding.” Chaewon explains.

“Oh but, it looks like Haseul already has plans though...?” Vivi says, looking to the other adult who is dressed for a night out. She would love to spend a night out with Haseul... as friends, of course... but she didn’t want to ruin any preexisting plans.

“Um. Well.” Haseul looks back at Vivi, still looking beautiful as ever in her white dress that she wore to work. No offense to Octavia Spencer... but if Haseul had to choose between the two... well... “I don’t have any plans!” Haseul decides nervously, a boldness coming out of her that even she doesn’t know where it came from. “No, we should... I mean if that is something you desire- no not desire that’s a weird word- I mean it’s- I mean-”

“I think that could be fun! As long as you don’t have plans... why not right?” the art teacher asks, sending a smile the principal’s way. The kids nearly scream in excitement that their matchmaking plan is panning out in their favor.

“Yeah... yeah! Yeah um we can do that!” Haseul says, all thoughts about *MA on Ice* completely erased from her memory.

“Okay.” Vivi says, butterflies in her stomach fluttering gently. Bright lights suddenly hit the back of the art teacher’s head as an unfamiliar shiny pink 2012 Bentley Continental pulls into the driveway, right next to her own red convertible.

“Who’s Paris Hilton looking ass car is that?” Yeojin says, now looking out the door. It’s definitely not Hyunjin’s big yellow punch buggy. All seven girls look out to the car that has just parked.

Hyunjin steps out of the passenger’s seat, her wavy hair swooshing as she smiles at the other person still inside the vehicle. Hyejoo gets a horrible feeling in her stomach when she realizes who the driver must be. Even worse when the lights turn off, signalling that she is parking and will be coming out. The door opens and Hyejoo’s suspicions are confirmed.

Lia, as elegant as ever, steps out of the car, her hair down and flowing beautifully in the night breeze. Green sparkles on her eyelids shimmer under the residential streetlights, leftover from the game earlier. She has on a simple green fuzzy sweater and leggings that she had changed into right before they left Hyunjin’s. Hyunjin walks over to her so they can walk towards the house together.

It wasn’t that Hyejoo didn’t like Lia. It was the fact that the Heart Shaker’s pizza they’d ordered would be arriving soon in the hands of a *very* specific delivery girl.

“Hi Hi!” Lia says, smiling up at everyone in the door. She gives an extra hi to Yeri, who basically has stars in her eyes ogling her teen idol, the closest thing to a neighborhood Ariana Grande.

“The babysitter...s?” Haseul asks, addressing the two girls in front of her as Vivi stands to the side.

“Yes Ms. Jo, that would be me,” Hyunjin says with a smile, giving a slight wave to the woman.

“I just came to walk her up here.” Lia explains, not wanting to intrude.

Hyejoo feels her anxiousness relax, a sigh of relief escaping her mouth. *She’s leaving, thank God.*

“NO YOU SHOULD COME IN.” Yeri bursts out of nowhere. “PLEASE? Just for a little bit!”

The rest of the kids send daggers to their friend. Yeri ignores them, only looking at Lia.

“Yeri, you know I love spending time with my fans, but I don’t know if Ms. Jo would be okay with that!” The cheerleader responds with a hand over her heart, still smiling.

“Oh that’s alright! Go ahead and stay for a little while, you seem lovely.” Haseul says kindly. “Just no... high school shenanigans!”

Hyunjin raises her eyebrows and looks at Lia. “We can play a game or something?”

Lia’s eyes sparkle (literally) as her eyes turn to Hyunjin. “Well Uno obviously! I’m kind of the best player in the world.”

Hyunjin chuckles and she and Lia both enter the house. Hyejoo feels like she might throw up at the drama storm coming their way.

Vivi pops her head into the doorway again and Haseul nods to her.

“Okay, I... guess we will be back later kids! Text me if you need anything!” Haseul says, as Vivi gestures to her car and the adults close the door behind them, leaving the teenagers and children inside.

“Well hello,” Haseul says to Vivi. The night has now turned over a new leaf, and to the principal every aspect of the world now buzzes with excitement.

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” Vivi says involuntarily. Both of them immediately begin to overthink the statement, and Haseul stares in the yellow lamppost light lamppost with flushed cheeks. “I’ll

drive.” Vivi quickly offers to change the subject, and Haseul nervously obliges. Together, they board the stunning red convertible.

Haseul takes in the leather cushioning of the seats, noting its vintage feel. The interior is surprisingly clean for someone with a middle school child, although there are a few stray papers here and there. One small picture of Chaewon clung to the driver’s side makeup mirror, but other than that, no other signs of Vivi’s life unknown to Haseul could be seen.

“So,” Vivi says, once both of them are strapped in, “Where to? I’m kinda hungry.”

Haseul snaps out of her thoughts as she realizes the question she has been asked.

“Umm...” Haseul wracks her brain for any idea of where they should go. It takes a second before she gasps as if the destination hit her in the face. “Let me treat you to my favorite place. They have the most *amazing* customer service.”

“No you have to use Tik Tok for your outfits and Instagram for pictures of your juice diets. Sometimes pearl tea but that’s on you.” Yeri furiously writes down notes as Lia gives her influencer tips.

Both high schoolers and the gang of friends were sitting in a circle around the living room playing a card game. Hyunjin and Lia were basically attached at the hip, and the other girls watched them with wide eyes. All except Yeri, who had been idolizing Lia the entire time she had been there.

“God I’m learning so much from you, I don’t know why I go to school.” Yeri says, scribbling quickly.

“Hey, it’s your turn.” Hyunjin nudges Lia playfully who giggles and puts down a red card on the pile in front of her.

Hyejoo wants to pull her eyes out of her sockets. She never would have called for pizza if she had known Hyunjin was going to bring Lia with her. The poor high schooler had already been through enough drama. Hyejoo doubted she needed to be confronted by her ex crush in front of... whatever Lia was to her. The pre-teen checks her phone for the progress on her Heart Shaker’s app. The pizza was only five minutes away now and Hyejoo had to admit she was a little stressed out.

At least she wasn’t the only one who understood the consequences of the situation. Choerry had been playing with her hands nervously every time Hyunjin scooted closer to Lia and Yeojin looked like she was ready to smack Yeri for encouraging the high schooler to stay. Chaewon was shaking her leg furiously, but Hyejoo didn’t know if that was because she was nervous or because she was just very shaky in general.

“Bingo!” Yeri screams, throwing down her last card.

“We’re playing *Uno* dipshit.” Yeojin groans, throwing the rest of her cards on the table.

“Damn, good game everyone!” Hyejoo shoots up from her spot on the floor. “I guess it’s time for Lia to go now. Very sad.”

“Hyejoo?” Hyunjin says, slightly defensive.

“She’s right! I really should get going. Britney Spears is dropping her new documentary on Netflix tonight and I need to prepare.” Lia stands, making Hyunjin stand too.

“Okay, I’ll walk you out.” Hyunjin says smiling.

“ME TOO.” Hyejoo interjects, her eyes wide as she looks back at her friends for support.

“Um, yeah!” Choerry says standing up.

“We will all... walk you out.” Chaewon states hesitantly.

“You’re just such an inspiration.” Yeojin says, getting up and taking Lia’s hand to shake.

“Excuse me? Back off...” Yeri says, her chest starting to heave like a wild animal. Yeojin takes a step back.

“AWW!” Lia says looking at all the girls. “That’s like, so cute. But it’s okay, I can find my own way to my car!”

Lia turns to Hyunjin. “Are you sure you’ll get home okay?”

Hyunjin nods. “Yeah I’ll just call a Lyft, don’t worry about it.”

“Okay. Text me.” Lia leans over to give Hyunjin a kiss on the cheek, then looks back at the kids. “See you around guys!”

“BYEEEE.” The kids all say in unison, mimicking the chorus children use in a classroom.

With that, Lia exits the house.

Hyunjin turns back to the middle schoolers squinting. “You guys are weird.”

Heejin pulls her car up to a house in a suburban neighborhood, the first on her long list of pizza orders for her shift.

She wasn’t even supposed to be on deliveries that night, but this asshole had specially requested that it was Heejin who delivered their food to them, so now she had to be on delivery duty for the rest of the night.

The girl takes the order receipt out of her pocket and looks at the customer’s email address for what is probably the 100th time since she first saw it.

MyDemonsCanSw1m@gmail.com

Heejin groans. Since the customer had ordered on the Heart Shaker’s app, this was the only information she knew about them other than their address. Which, now that Heejin was outside of the place, she could confirm that she had no idea whose house this was.

She huffs once more before grabbing the order of five pizzas and exiting her car. The soft breeze of the darkening night crosses her face as she shuts the door, the orange sun creating a purple effect on the clear sky above her. She’s walking around the front of her car when the door to the house opens. Heejin squints.

Lia?

Heejin suddenly backtracks, nearly dropping the order to hide behind her car. Even though it was dark out, Heejin could clearly make out the pink car parked in the driveway.

Of course that was Lia's. Heejin had seen Lia walking towards it in the parking lot at school occasionally. Well, she had seen *Hyunjin* walking towards it with Lia occasionally... not that she was keeping tabs on her or anything. But what was the captain of the cheerleading squad doing here? Was this her house?

Lia gets into her car's driver seat, completely oblivious of the Heart Shaker's employee ducking in the shadows. Thinking about it, Heejin realized how ridiculous she was being. There were barely any other cars in the driveway, so maybe Sana had just gotten the address of the customer wrong and this was all just a weird coincidence.

Nevertheless, Heejin waits until Lia's car is far down the road before shaking off her unease. She heads towards the door, adjusting the Heart Shaker's hat on her head before ringing the doorbell.

"GUYS THAT'S PROBABLY THE-"

Heejin's heart plummets into her stomach hearing the muffled sentence from inside the house. She could identify that loud voice anywhere.

Hyunjin opens the door, and immediately recognizes the girl in front of her.

"...Pizza."

Heejin stands there, mouth slightly agape as she takes Hyunjin in. She hadn't truly interacted with the girl since that stupid party but man, did she still take the delivery girl's breath away. Heejin knows that Hyunjin is only wearing sweats, and maybe she was just panicking, but she doesn't think she's ever seen the girl look so good.

Honestly, Heejin thinks Hyunjin is so naturally beautiful that everything she wears never truly seems like regular clothes. Plus her hair was flowing perfectly in gorgeous waves down her shoulders and *oh god she's been standing and staring in silence for way too long now.*

"Uh hi, hey." Heejin scrambles out roughly, wanting to kick herself.

"Hey..." Hyunjin responds awkwardly.

For two people who had been constantly thinking about the things they would say to each other, neither of them seemed to know how to speak.

Suddenly, Hyejoo approaches the pair quickly and snatches the pizza boxes out of Heejin's hands.

"Thanks!" The kid says in a much higher pitch than usual. She shoves a wad of cash into Hyunjin's hand before running back into the house.

"Oh right, um, how much?" Hyunjin stumbles over her words, her head down unravelling the wad in her hands.

She definitely was not expecting Heejin to show up right now. Plus she kind of wanted to slap herself for feeling somewhat excited because of the girl standing in front of her

"I think... thirty... something." Heejin says awkwardly, not having the receipt to look at anymore. It was on top of the box which was now out of her sight. "You know what, it's okay, it's on me."

"What? No you don't have to do that, these kids are like, loaded here." Hyunjin tries to hand Heejin the entire wad.

“Well I still want to buy it for you.” Heejin says chuckling lightly.

Hyunjin puts her hand down, letting out a breath and smiling slightly. “Thanks.”

Awkward silence once again.

Hyejoo and the rest of her friends watch the cringy interaction from the kitchen table.

“They’re useless.” Yeojin whispers and Hyejoo swats her away.

“They just need more pushing.” Hyejoo whispers back. She suddenly raises her voice. “Hey Hyunjin we’re all good here, like *perfect* actually. So perfect, in fact that you could even have a conversation without worrying about us if you want!”

Hyunjin looks back at the girls and squints. *No wonder they were acting so crazy earlier.*

“Actually,” Heejin feels the nerves building up in her body as Hyunjin turns back around to look at her. Heejin had been wanting to talk to Hyunjin for a while about everything that happened at the disaster that was Ryujin’s New Year’s Eve party. But knowing that she was on the wrong end of the whole situation, she didn’t want to cross any lines. She figured that if Hyunjin wanted to talk to her she would let her decide on her own. She didn’t want to cause the girl any more pain than she already had.

But being here now with her, face to face, she can feel the familiar energy she had always felt around Hyunjin. The feeling of never wanting to leave. And there was just no way she could wait any longer.

“Do you think... we could talk?” Heejin finally breathes out, gesturing outside.

Hyunjin lets a beat go by as she thinks. She didn’t know if she was emotionally ready for this if she was being honest. On top of that she was babysitting and if things went south, these kids would most likely be watching her have a mental breakdown for the rest of the night... again.

But Heejin did something to Hyunjin. It was like her heart was attached to a string and only Heejin was able to pull the other end. Plus the pizza worker looked like a hurt puppy, and Hyunjin could only take so much.

“O-okay.” Hyunjin responds gently.

Heejin’s eyes are wide as she nods, stepping out of the doorway enough for Hyunjin to leave the house.

“I’ll be right back! Please don’t... die? Okay whatever, I’ll be right back.” Hyunjin shouts to the girls as she heads outside, Heejin following close behind.

“So...” Hyunjin starts, awkwardly sitting on top of the hood of Heejin’s car, her knees pulled up to her chest in comfort.

Heejin had pulled her car into the driveway, saying it would be a more comfortable place to converse than the concrete ground.

Was it? No, not really, but Heejin was extremely nervous and truth be told, she needed to stall for a second in order to calm herself down. But enough was enough, the girl needed to get some things

off of her chest before they crushed her completely.

Heejin takes a deep breath, turning to look at the girl next to her. "I think you should know everything that happened. And I'm not telling you to excuse what I've done or anything but I just think... I'd want to know, you know?"

Heejin bites her lip as Hyunjin processes what she's been told. Slowly Hyunjin begins to nod her head. Maybe it would help her get over whatever feelings she was still holding on to. Heejin takes another breath.

"I really was going to meet you that night. I was just... I don't know. Not that you owed me anything. But, it was just like... I felt like you were leading me on with the whole 'meeting as friends' thing. And I should've talked to you... but I was upset. And I didn't want to talk to you while I was upset because I didn't want to ruin our friendship by getting mad at you."

"So when Ryuji called me to talk before I was about to head over to the diner..." She continues. "I just thought, maybe talking to her would help me blow off some steam before going to meet you."

"Oh is that what that's called." Hyunjin says quietly, a joking tone sprinkled with small specks of hurt as she recalls the position she found them in that fateful night.

Heejin stops for a second, swallowing hard. "I didn't know that was going to happen. I just thought, maybe I wouldn't be so sad if I went to talk to her about it first... I don't know. Then she told me... everything she did."

Hyunjin shifts uncomfortably at the retelling of the story. It was like she was watching herself being stabbed in the back all over again. Nevertheless, she stays silent to let Heejin continue.

"She convinced me that you really didn't have feelings for me. So when she told me she liked me I thought at least... it would help me get over you. I had no idea."

Heejin goes on, a hint of desperation in her voice, almost trembling. "I'm not saying any of this is an excuse. Or that it was all Ryuji's fault, because I was the idiot that believed her over you. And I told her that when I broke up with her after finding out she lied."

So she did break up with her. Hyunjin thinks to herself. She hadn't seen them around the halls lately, but she didn't think much of it since she had been pretty good at avoiding them for the better half of the school year. Hyunjin can't lie though, this new information does spark her with a little sense of joy. Whether or not that means anything about her feelings towards Heejin, well... Hyunjin decides to think about that at a later time.

Heejin takes a shaky breath before making sure to look Hyunjin in the eyes. The first time in God knows how long, and Hyunjin can't help but fall a little into them.

"You are the most important person in the world to me, Hyunjin. The last thing I ever want to do is hurt you."

Hyunjin notes Heejin's use of present tense, and it makes her heart race speed up slightly. "You did though." Hyunjin says softly, looking away.

Heejin looks down at her leg, pinching her thigh to try and control the knot she feels in the back of her throat.

"I know." She breathes out shakily, looking back up at Hyunjin, a sign of holding back tears in her

eyes. "I'm so sorry."

A car passes by, making the girls' shift their attention to look out into the street, the lights moving gently across their faces. It's awkwardly silent as Heejin looks back at Hyunjin.

"I would've taken your flowers." Heejin says, making Hyunjin's heart drop. "If I could go back in time... I would meet you at the diner."

Hyunjin looks at her for a moment, analyzing the look on the other girl's face. Heejin looks absolutely defeated, eyes filled with sorrow and guilt. Hyunjin had never seen her like this before, which is why she can tell that Heejin is being one hundred percent honest with her. Even though she wants to suppress the feeling, knowing Heejin doesn't deserve her pity, Hyunjin's heart aches. Heejin may have made a few unthinkable mistakes, but being able to accept responsibility meant something to Hyunjin.

"Thank you Heej. That actually means a lot. Really." Hyunjin says sincerely, and Heejin lets a sigh of relief escape her mouth, her stomach flipping at the use of a nickname she hadn't heard in so long. She nods quietly, about to speak until Hyunjin squints at her.

"Except... That's kind of lame." the younger girl says, causing Heejin to burrow her eyebrows in panic.

"What?" Heejin asks.

"Well, if I could reverse time, I would invent Apple or something, you know? Get that bag secured." Hyunjin says, a smile creeping up on her face.

Heejin chuckles, one hand over her chest as she pushes Hyunjin playfully with the other. "You scared me!"

Hyunjin laughs, sending Heejin over the moon. Call her crazy, but she had thought about whether or not she would ever get to hear that wonderful sound again for months.

Hyunjin suddenly recognizes the navy blue Heart Shaker's hat on Heejin's head as her laughter dies down. "Oh shit, you're working aren't you? Aren't you going to get in trouble for being out here?"

Heejin smiles softly. "Yeah... but if they fire me that's okay. Honestly, I've been going kind of crazy being there. Chef Momo sticks her head in the oven to check the temperature instead of using a thermometer... Plus, I never wanted the job in the first place. "

"You don't say!" Hyunjin says, making Heejin giggle. Butterflies erupt from an undetected source in Hyunjin's stomach, making her uneasy.

"Yeah. I've been thinking about just focusing on sketching again. I don't know if you know this but I'm awful at making decisions." Heejin says sarcastically.

Hyunjin chuckles and Heejin readjusts herself on the car to face Hyunjin entirely.

"But that's enough about me." Heejin says. "What about you? How is everything?"

Hyunjin takes a deep, full breath. "...Good," she says, and it's true. She was on the basketball team, leaving her house for things other than school, putting herself back out there.

Heejin waits for a second, working up the courage to say something.

“So... you and Lia have been hanging out...?” She questions, trying to be nonchalant.

Hyunjin looks at her with a puzzled look on her face, and Heejin backtracks.

“I just, I saw her leaving earlier so I um, just wanted to ask. Ha.” Heejin says, rather uncomfortably, knowing perfectly well that she wasn’t allowed to have any opinion on the matter.

“Yeah she’s been there for me. I like her a lot, she’s like, my favorite person.” Hyunjin says, wincing a little at her choice of words for multiple reasons.

Heejin’s heart pangs inside her chest, but she tries her best to hide it, feigning a smile. “That’s great. I’m glad you have someone there for you, especially when I wasn’t... you know, you deserve that.”

Hyunjin smiles awkwardly, trying her best to have a positive outlook even though her heart feels like it’s being put through a grinder.

Another car passes by, sending a breeze the girls’ way. It gets under Heejin’s uniform hat, making it fly into the air.

“Fuck.” Heejin says, scrambling her arms around in the air to retrieve her cap. However, Hyunjin catches it first, landing her in a position hovering over Heejin, definitely closer than where they were before.

It’s like a gravitational reset, being this close to each other. Neither of them could explain it, but it was as if an invisible force was pulling them together. Even when they realized their proximity, it took all of Hyunjin’s strength to move away from the girl.

“Uh, here.” Hyunjin holds out the hat for Heejin to take, her cheeks a little red.

Heejin takes the hat, her fingers accidentally brushing against Hyunjin’s in the process. A strange rush goes through the girl and she puts the hat back on her head.

“Thanks, you always had better coordination than I did.” Heejin compliments.

“No kidding, you looked like you were trying to swat a fly.” Hyunjin responds.

It’s silent, for a second before the air is filled with hearty laughs coming from both of the teenagers.

Another car’s light begins to shine on them as they giggle, however instead of passing by, the lights get brighter as the car pulls into the driveway.

The girls gather themselves, hands over their respective eyes as they try to look at who has just pulled up.

“Am I interrupting something?”

Hyunjin’s smile fades as the voice sounds through the crisp air. Lia stands in front of them, holding some fabric in her hands.

“Hey!” Hyunjin says, suddenly a little nervous. “We were just laughing at something dumb.”

Lia knew she had no right to be jealous. They had just talked about their relationship and the whole point of that conversation was to understand where they were at with each other. But Lia couldn’t help but feel her gut twist a little at the sight of Hyunjin laughing with her old best friend. One she

definitely had feelings for, at that.

“Hi Heejin.” Lia says coolly with a tight-lipped smile.

Both Heejin and Hyunjin do a double take when Lia says her name correctly. It kind of scares Heejin to be quite honest. Like when her mother would call her by her full name when she was in trouble.

“Hi.” Heejin says, sending Lia a little wave. “I was just dropping off some pizza and I asked Hyun if we could talk some stuff out.”

Lia raises her eyebrows. Hyun. Okay.

“That’s great!” Lia sends Heejin a very short lived smile before turning to Hyunjin, voice turning tender. “I found this on the floor in my car and I didn’t know if you needed it. So I brought it back.”

Lia hands Hyunjin a black shirt with a Stüssy logo printed in white on the back. Heejin's breath hitches when she realizes that it wasn't just any shirt. That was *her* shirt, the one she had given Hyunjin all those months ago. Hyunjin takes the clothing, looking a little redder than she would have liked to in this moment.

Heejin looks between Lia, the shirt, and Hyunjin. She doesn't know whether to be hopeful that Hyunjin still wears her shirt, or to be crushed under the fact that it had somehow ended up on the floor of another girl's car.

“Thanks, you’re amazing.” Hyunjin says smiling up at Lia.

Somehow, this makes the girl standing forget about her worries for a second, while also flooding Heejin with worries of her own.

Heejin knew Hyunjin had called Lia her favorite person... but what did that mean exactly? Did she have feelings for her too?

“I know.” Lia responds, making Hyunjin chuckle a little. “That was pretty much it, I really do need to get home for that documentary. I heard Britney performs ‘Circus’ at an actual circus. I have to prepare for the waterworks!”

Lia has a smile on her face, but it threatens to fall when she realizes that means she'll be leaving Hyunjin alone with Heejin... more than she had already.

As if by some miracle to Lia, a loud noise comes from inside the house followed by the loud scream of Chaewon shouting “YERI!” .

All the high schoolers look back towards the house and Hyunjin stands up from the car hood.

“Yeah I should probably get going too, they can only last so long in there.” Hyunjin says, smiling gently. Both girls opposite her have to stop themselves from swooning.

“For sure.” Heejin replies, interrupting Lia's daze from Hyunjin. “I should probably finish these deliveries anyway.”

Heejin hops off the car, standing awkwardly for a moment. You see, she wanted to give Hyunjin a hug goodbye, but with the way Lia was glaring at her... She didn't think that was such a great idea. And, Heejin knew that being engulfed completely in that girl would drive her insane for the rest of

the night.

Heejin waves a shy goodbye to Hyunjin who waves back. Heejin walks around the front of her car to the driver's seat, where she watches Lia take Hyunjin's hand and lightly squeeze it before walking away herself. Heejin can't help but feel her core fill with jealousy, and she wanted to kick herself for it. She was in no position to be envious of a situation she caused.

Hyunjin walks towards the door and Lia pulls out of the driveway once more. Heejin puts her hand on the gear shift to follow, but before she leaves, she has one more thing to do, something she had forgotten to say.

Hyunjin is closing the door behind her when she hears her phone ping. She takes it out and looks down at the new message.

Heejin: Thanks for giving me the chance to explain myself.

Hyunjin watches the typing bubbles come and go at the corner of her screen before her phone pings once more.

Heejin: I missed you.

Hyunjin's stomach swirls as she re-reads the text a few times. A little unnerved at the feelings arising within herself, she taps the message bar to reply anyway.

Hyunjin: I missed you too.

From the moment it happened to now, waiting patiently in line at the Panda Express, Ms. Wong cannot think of anything else but Principal Haseul holding open the door for her. Toes pressed against the sparkling faux granite of the counter, Vivi peers through the dividing glass in an attempt to distract herself from her fluttering heart as she replays the sight.

The fast food joint is not exceptionally busy at this time of night, and most people are egging their cars along the drive thru. Because of this, it's easy for Vivi to hear every word out of Haseul's mouth - like how the principal is the first person she's ever seen under the age of 50 to directly address every worker by the name on their badge. Despite the underlying kookiness of it all there is just something endearing about the way Haseul takes time to ask "How are you today, Bob!"

Haseul tucks some fallen strands of short black hair away from her eyes as the worker stuffs her bowl with orange chicken, "Double the orange chicken, please," she declares comfortably, and Haseul looks shocked when she turns to see Vivi already staring at her with a smile.

"Miss," Bob, the worker behind the glass calls out again to Vivi, patiently holding his ladle. "And for you today?"

Vivi clears her throat and manages to get out a "Same as her," and she catches Haseul's amused smile from the corner of her eye.

When the principal and teacher finally reach the cash register, Haseul is first, and another employee sleepily hands over a short receipt to her with some other short paperwork because yes, Haseul wants to donate to St. Jude. "And we're just gonna have you sign right here please..." Just a few inches away from Vivi, Haseul bends down to write over the paper, and Vivi's eyes are trained

on it as a bell rings rapidly in announcement of the donation.

The sight of Haseul's handwriting is akin to a tickle in your nose that's just not enough to make you sneeze. The neat script is familiar; Vivi knows it reminds her of something but she doesn't know what.

Haseul hands the receipt back to Bob smiling. She looks down at the edge of the counter where a small bowl of complimentary chocolates sits and gasps excitedly. She picks up a mini Snickers in pink foil wrapping.

"I know I've eaten like 50 of these today with the grams and stuff, but they're so good!" Haseul says, happily unwrapping the chocolate.

The mystery gram. The teacher is reminded of as she looks at the candy. That's where the art teacher knows the handwriting from.

Oh my God.

Vivi's cardiovascular system at this point is akin to an overworking computer on the verge of explosion, as a swelling panic overcomes her train of thought. Was it really *Haseul* who left that very sweet note in her teacher's lounge cubbie?

That gram had marveled upon how wonderful Vivi was, that she had an aura that captured anyone who saw her and anyone would be lucky to be close to her... but perhaps the art teacher had read the tone wrong?

But friends could say kind words about each other too, right? Through... A Valentine's Day card...

The two women move to a nearby table and sit down opposite each other. Vivi thinks hard, working her best to not express whatever it was she was feeling through her face. She smiles along to Haseul rambling about the great work Bob was doing for the restaurant.

The thought of it being more than friendly is too scary for the art teacher to even consider. Mainly because when she looks at the principal's goofy smile sitting across from her, she can feel her heart giving her an answer...

No. Vivi thinks, It had to have been friendly.

And for her sanity, Vivi chooses to believe what she knows is not true.

"Like, the texture of the chicken is so complex you know? Not everyone can just serve it that-" Haseul is still going, but is cut off by a man around her age approaching their table, a couple other similar guys following behind, staying near the counter.

"Hi gorgeous." He says confidently, gently placing a hand on the back of her chair. "So, what do I have to do for you to give me your number?"

Haseul shoots Vivi a nervous glance, before looking up at the man towering over her. "Um, n-no that's okay." She replies quietly.

"Oh come on beautiful, it's just a number... I know you really want to, you don't have to be embarrassed." The man says, looking Haseul up and down. The principal crosses her arms, trying her best to cover herself, which fills Vivi up with rage. So much rage in fact, that Vivi can't help but insert herself.

“She’s not embarrassed, she just doesn’t want to give you her number, creep.” The red haired woman says, turning the man’s attention to the person he had been ignoring. The man’s friend’s at the counter start chuckling lightly, causing his ego to escalate.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t talking to you, I was talking to your friend here.” He snarls, turning back with a smirk to look at Haseul, who was shrinking herself into the chair as much as possible.

Vivi doesn’t think twice when she stands up out of her chair aggressively.

“Actually, I’m her *girlfriend*, you little fuck.” Vivi says, shocked at the words coming out of her own mouth, wavering a little. As to not blow her cover, she moves to stand in front of Haseul, reaching for her hand. “So I think you should leave her the fuck alone.”

The guys by the counter start laughing profusely as the man turns red. Vivi looks at them next.

“And why are you guys laughing? You’re middle aged men acting like teenagers in a Panda Express. This isn’t high school, grow the hell up!” She yells, making them go quiet.

“Jesus, alright we’ll leave. Sorry.” The man at their table says, backpedaling, hands up. Vivi doesn’t sit back down until the men leave the restaurant. She doesn’t let go of Haseul’s hand until then either.

For good measure and appearance. Obviously.

Once they leave, Haseul takes a deep breath, which reminds Vivi to sit down. She disconnects their hands, turning to put one of her own on the woman’s shoulder. Vivi crouches so that she and Haseul are at eye level now.

“Are you okay?” Vivi asks, eyes filled with concern.

Haseul’s face was beet red, but not out of embarrassment. Honestly, the woman couldn’t focus on anything else ever since Vivi had said ‘I’m her girlfriend asshole.’

Why would she say that? It was just to help her out of the situation right? It crushed Haseul’s heart to think so... but there was a small sense of hope that this wasn’t the reason. I mean there were a lot of other ways she could have helped her get out of that right? Not to mention the fact that it had taken everything in Haseul not to pass out when Vivi took her hand.

“Y-yeah. Yeah! Yeah everything’s fine! That was CRAZY. HA.” Haseul says, not making eye contact with Vivi. She pokes one of her orange chickens with a fork, moving it a little.

Vivi rubs her shoulder of her favorite person, very concerned and frankly still fuming. “Hey the environment is kinda ruined here... How about I take you to my favorite spot?” she offers soothingly.

Haseul sighs deeply, then nods in agreement as the excitement of the night flows back into her.

Vivi stands again and wraps up both of their food carefully. “Come on!” Vivi gestures towards the door.

Haseul smiles, standing up herself. “Okay!” She responds giddily. The principal follows Vivi to her car, leaving the Panda Express table behind.

However, the memory of Vivi calling herself Haseul’s girlfriend can’t help but follow both women out the door.

Jungeun rests on Jinsol's chest, happily spent. Jinsol's fingers absentmindedly rove her wife's body, marked heavily with Jinsol's love bites from Jungeun's neck to the ones she just finished leaving on her inner thighs.

Jungeun's breathing steadies in her wife's arms, one of the soft blankets thrown over them. The fireplace crackles are their side.

Jungeun props herself up on her elbow suddenly to look at her wife, tracing patterns over the soft skin of Jinsol's chest.

Jungeun looks up to see her wife staring lovingly at her.

"Can I kiss you?" Jinsol says softly.

"What?" her wife asks, and her voice comes out embarrassingly hoarse. "We just had sex..." Twelve times, she might add.

Jinsol giggles at the word, making Jungeun chuckle too and their melodious childlike laughter fills the cabin living room.

Jungeun sinks down to lay at Jinsol's side, and swipes a thumb over her wife's cheek. "I could lay here and kiss you for the rest of my life," Jungeun admits, then suddenly remembers their daughter at home in Los Angeles. "Oh, Choerry--"

"Is okay," Jinsol calmly runs her hand over Jungeun's exposed back. "I called her when you were in the bath, she's having fun," she smiles. "She wanted me to tell you she misses you."

Jungeun smiles at their sweetheart of a daughter. "You two are getting so close again," she says quietly. "I can't keep up."

Jinsol smiles. "You know we'd be nothing without you."

Jungeun melts. "I miss her too," the other mother sighs. "But it's so nice to have a second honeymoon with you," she blushes gazing at her glowing wife in the firelight.

Jinsol says nothing as she takes in Jungeun's beauty beside her, and Jungeun is increasingly nervous at her uncharacteristic silence.

"Do you think I'm a good mom?" Jinsol asks, bringing all her self-doubt to the narrow space between them.

Jungeun's gaze softens as she lovingly traces the line of Jinsol's jaw.

"Be honest," Jinsol whispers, afraid. "Because I don't know if I'll ever make it up to you both."

Jungeun pauses, as if taking time to think about it, making her wife tense with anxiety.

"You are," Jungeun declares, with the most tender smile. "Because you've been here for her," Jungeun swipes the back of her palm over her wife's soft cheek fondly, thinking of that very night when Choerry broke down for the first time, and Jinsol was there to hold her together in a way Jungeun never could. She thinks of every time Jinsol asked about the characters in Choerry's life during dinner. Every time Jinsol has enthusiastically helped their daughter with homework, despite all the work she has of her own. And every time Jungeun's noticed that childlike laugh of

Choerry's come back into their lives.

"You are," Jungeun repeats, with an endlessly appreciative smile.

Jinsol just stares into her eyes, taking in every beautiful part of her. She almost bursts into tears, thinking of how fast time has flown by.

"Can I marry you?" Jinsol whispers ever so quietly.

Jungeun blinks, confused. "We *are* married," she laughs, and Jinsol laughs with her.

"I wish I could do it again," Jinsol says simply, then just takes her wife in as she caresses her skin. "And again, and again, and again..." the scientist trails off.

Then suddenly, Jinsol's eyes widen in distraction. "Oh look, it's snowing so hard outside!" She sits up, holding the blanket to her chest as she looks out the window at the piling snow. "Wow, can you believe it?"

Jinsol hears a soft sob, then turns back to the bed to see Jungeun crying into her hand.

"Oh no, oh no no no, why are you crying honey?"

Jungeun is full-on sobbing into her hand, as if Jinsol peeping at the snow was the straw that broke the camel's back. She is a gasping, sniffling mess and Jinsol lowers herself down at her side again, cupping her face. "What's wrong? Oh God, did something bite you?"

"What?!" Jungeun asks in bewilderment, now a little concerned.

"I don't know!" Jinsol responds, panicked.

"What did I ever do to deserve you Jinsol," Jungeun asks in a paper-thin whisper in between hard sobs. She cries hard while Jinsol, trying to calm her wife, strokes the hair by her face soothingly.

"You deserve everything and more, Jungeun," Jinsol reassures, and her wife just cries harder whimpering something unintelligible (Jinsol can only make out the word *sweetheart*). It makes Jinsol's heartache, that Jungeun can't seem to accept the fact.

"My love," Jinsol starts gently, "I've only been thinking of myself for so, *so* long. I was always there, but for years I wasn't present," Jinsol preaches. "But you were. You deserve all the pampering in the world. And you are *everything* to me Jungeun," Jinsol says honestly, as her wife continues to cry hard in front of her. "You and Yerim are everything to me, but you deserve this. I didn't really know exactly what you wanted... But I wanted to give you your fantasy-"

Suddenly, Jungeun's sobbing intensifies.

"Why are you crying?!" Jinsol laughs a little as she continuously wipes the tears from her wife's face.

Jungeun gasps through her tears and mumbles something incoherent.

"What?"

"*I ONLY GOT YOU A NECKLACE!*" Jungeun screeches, and sobs more as Jinsol laughs out loud. She pulls her wife into her arms because it doesn't matter to Jinsol, it doesn't matter one bit.

"I'm sure it's a very pretty necklace!" Jinsol asserts through innocent laughter.

"It's not funny," Jungeun whines like a toddler as her tears smear against Jinsol's bare chest.

"You know... You give me the greatest gift in the world by letting me wake up next to you, every morning," Jinsol coos, and Jungeun is an emotional wreck.

"You are so *corny*," Jungeun sobs violently.

"Hey!"

"And I *love* you," Jungeun states it like it's the simplest truth in the world. "I love you the most."

Vivi Wong and Haseul Jo sit together on the sand, as the pitch black waves wash over not too far in front of them.

The blackness of the night sky envelops the empty Santa Monica beach. Thankfully, their coats provide just enough protection from the onshore breeze to keep their teeth from chattering. But this doesn't stop the two of them from sitting a little too close to each other, their shoulders touching. Together they sit in their comfortable bubble, just finishing their plates from Panda Express while both women's hearts beat faster than they'd care to admit.

Haseul could have never predicted that she would *actually* be spending her Valentine's Day with the infinitely enchanting Ms. Wong (she figured it was a scenario that would only reside in the confines of her dreams, both night and day). But this is no longer fantasy, and Vivi sits right next to her in all her undeniable beauty laughing to death at all of Haseul's horrible impressions of their coworkers.

Vivi struggles to sip from the large soda cup as she chokes on her laughter in re: Haseul's Irene impression ("*Haseul, you cannot give Mentos to the Science teachers and ask them to put them in dangerous chemicals just to 'See what happens.'* I'm boring. Grrr. "). Haseul, giggling at her own comedy, pops open one of the complimentary fortune cookies from the fast food chain. Vivi sits her soda cup in the sand and proceeds to do the same.

When they crack open the wafers themselves, Haseul tugs out her white paper slip to read first, and looks absolutely perplexed.

The whole fortune just says:

Yes. It is.

"*Yes it is?!?*" Haseul reads out the nonsensical fortune, bewildered. "YES WHAT IS?!" She cries out to the universe while Vivi collapses into a giggling fit yet again. "*WHAT?!?*"

Vivi tugs her slip out, and Haseul can just barely make out her coworker's face in the darkness. Vivi scoffs with an unamused smile at the slip of paper. Haseul waits for her to read it out.

"*You will be lucky in love,*" Vivi reads, in a tone that in no way matches that of the optimistic fortune. She looks down at the prophecy with a smile, one of bitter despondency.

The art teacher sits up a little to gracefully place the little paper into their designated trash bag, quiet.

"What's wrong with that?" Haseul prods gently. She hates to admit it, but the inkling of hope she gets is undeniable.

Vivi smiles a sad smile as she looks out toward the sea. “I’ll thank God if that fortune’s true, because I have never been.”

The tone between them goes somber. If Vivi thinks the topic of conversation is going to wash away like the sand in front of them, she’s mistaken - Haseul sits and waits patiently for some sort of explanation from the other woman.

Vivi, feeling like she has no other choice but to keep talking now, decides to do so. But it’s not the worst option, considering her audience is someone as compassionate as Haseul.

“Chaewon’s father,” Vivi explains, “walked out on us six years ago.”

“*What?*” Haseul asks, unable to conceal the strength of her shock. With wide eyes, her mouth falls open a little. “Vivi, I-I had no idea- I’m so sorry-”

“I’m not from here, you know,” Vivi says quietly. Haseul doesn’t know where this is coming from. But she revels in it. For the first time, Vivi feels comfortable enough with her to tell her about herself, about the things that matter.

“I am from a quiet city in rural China,” she sighs.

Haseul can’t picture captivating, vibrant Vivi being from anywhere other than their city of the sun, but the principal doesn’t say a word as she listens attentively.

“I never liked anything about my life until he came into it,” she says, over the rolling of the night tide. “I was still in school when I met him. Studying everything but what I really cared about.

“He was new, and exciting. Charming as ever,” she smiles a little. “He was one of those people you would admire from afar. Older than me, too. And when I looked at him... It was idolatry. Then one day, he put himself in my orbit, and everything... everything was tangible. And I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.”

Haseul purses her lips. She knows that feeling.

“We moved fast, fell in love, and he wanted me to run away with him. To LA.

“My family was completely against it. They had every right to be, but I didn’t understand it then. I was too caught up in this... This illusion of agency, this feeling that my salvation had come to me with some idyllic ticket to perfection. The entire time, I was being commodified.”

Vivi never talked enough for Haseul to know how articulate she was, and the principal just stares in awe of her.

“My family told me that if I went with him, they’d cut me off. I’d never be welcome home again.” Vivi scoffs again as she looks down at the sand. “So I ran away with him.

“We eloped in LA, got an apartment together. He was a big, money-making businessman... I didn’t have to do a single thing but paint. And I was *happy*. I didn’t have anyone else in the world, but I was happy.

Haseul studies Vivi’s eyes, fixated on the black of the ocean, never once daring to meet hers. The wound is, undoubtedly, still raw.

“It wasn’t too long before I was pregnant with Chaewon. He was able to buy us a nice house,” she says, before a shaky breath and a reflective pause.

“Everything was beautiful, Haseul,” she says as her eyes shine with a thin layer of tears. “For seven years, it was so, very beautiful.”

There is another pause, and it’s almost as if Vivi physically can’t get the rest of it out.

“You don’t have to tell me,” her friend whispers softly.

“No, no I...” Vivi clears her throat. “I will.”

“He started to get annoyed with me, more and more easily, even with the simplest little things. I have no idea why,” Vivi says, and the hurt in her voice makes Haseul struggle to not wrap her arms around her. “All of a sudden he just didn’t want to talk to me anymore, just completely shut me out.

“It was like someone flipped a switch, and he was so far away. To this day... I still don’t understand it, and I’ll never know what I did,” Vivi smiles bitterly through tears in her eyes.

“And I told myself, ‘It’s okay, spouses go through things like this, one of these days he’s just gonna tell me what’s bothering him,’” she nods.

“A week later I woke up and he was gone.”

“*What?*”

“While I was asleep,” Vivi says shakily, “He packed all of his things, every little thing,” she struggles very hard not to let her tears fall, as if she’s practiced telling this story time and time again. Little does Haseul know that she is one of the only people on this earth to hear it.

“I woke up to his desk empty, his clothes gone, I tried to call *so many times*, ” Vivi’s voice cracks. “The number had already been disconnected. It was like he died. ...Not even a note,” she smiles before the ocean, and it’s the saddest smile Haseul has ever seen. The principal’s blood boils.

“And Chaewon, oh Chaewon,” Vivi shuts her eyes as she shakes her head painfully. “She’s asking me where Daddy is and I don’t know what to tell her,” Haseul fights tears from spilling out of her own eyes. “I’m scrambling, Haseul, he left without a trace and I don’t even have a job,” she wipes the tears from her own eyes.

“I left my entire life behind to be dependent on him. I lost my *family*. ”

Vivi stops for a moment, and Haseul looks around at her surroundings, and feels like the entire world has done itself over again and she is experiencing it for the first time. The air is just a bit colder, the world just a bit harsher.

“Luckily, he left us in the summer,” Vivi resumes, quieter than before. “So I could pull it together and get an art teaching job for the next school year.”

Vivi smiles a genuine, happy one. “And five years later, Chaewon is just about to be in eighth grade when she tells me her art teacher at St. Jihyo’s fell down the stairs and had to quit. And rumor has it Yeojin buttered the floor,” she laughs melodically, despite the dried tears on her face.

It was me, Haseul remembers, but Vivi doesn’t need to know that.

“And now I’m here,” for the first time since her story began, Vivi turns to meet Haseul’s eyes. “And now...”

Haseul expects Vivi to say something about Nate, but she trails off and stays quiet. “How is that?”

Haseul prompts instead.

“He’s...” Vivi gazes off to the waves with a faraway expression. “He makes me feel safe.”

Vivi speaks so devoid of passion that Haseul’s eyes widen, and her heart begins to race even faster. But she keeps quiet. Vivi does too, and there’s another pregnant pause that feels like it lasts a lifetime.

“Just safe?” Haseul asks.

“No, he’s more than that...” Vivi sounds conflicted. “He’s kind and he cares about Chaewon...” (Nate doesn’t know the first thing about Chaewon, and has never shown any interest to.) “He does a lot for us.”

Haseul nods, and looks away.

“Maybe... Maybe I’m overstepping...” Haseul starts, and Vivi turns to face her, shoulders brushing together. “But it seems that romance is important to you. Running away and all... Why settle for easy?”

“Sometimes it’s better in the long run.” Vivi replies, her finger tracing absentminded circles in the sand. It’s silent for a beat as they both think for a while, bare toes seeking warmth in the dark sand.

“You do know yourself better than me,” Haseul says quietly. “But I think you deserve better than that.”

Vivi purses her lips and looks away.

She wonders what experience Haseul, a single mom as well, has had with love. But before she can ask-

“Also his car is kinda ugly,” Haseul chirps lightheartedly.

Vivi laughs loudly, and Haseul joins in just thinking about the garish lime green Lamborghini. Suddenly, Vivi rests her head on Haseul’s shoulder. The principal freezes, doesn’t even let herself take a breath.

For a beat, it’s quiet again. Vivi gathers that if Haseul feels comfortable enough to share about her past romances, she will. Until then, she’s left to make sense of this discussion.

“I know I do.” Vivi says. “But I think it’s very rare in this world that people get what they deserve.”

“You will,” Haseul responds, ever the optimist. “You’re right about that. But you will. ...If you let yourself,” she whispers, subtly alluding to their situation as much as she possibly can without saying how she feels outright.

Vivi lets out a resigned sigh, comfortable on warm Haseul’s shoulder as they stare out into the empty, black sea. “At least I have you,” she whispers softly.

“HA, ha ha well,” Haseul says awkwardly, working up a sweat without even moving. The woman she has been in love with since the very minute she walked in for her job interview is now laying on her shoulder on Valentine’s Day.

Haseul prays Vivi cannot hear her heart beating, as she feels the racing rhythm reverberating

excitedly through every cavern in her body. Vivi's feminine scent is intoxicating.

But deep down, fear manifests within Haseul, that despite the reality of their situation, what she wants is further away than she thinks.

Vivi doesn't really take risks anymore, the principal has gathered. Haseul fears that she's a risk Vivi will never take.

The group of middle school friends had all since fixed their bed spaces and most of them had fallen asleep. Yeojin had given up her queen-sized bed for Chaewon and Hyejoo to share. Yeri, Choerry and Yeojin made padding with multiple blankets so that they could rest on the floor for the night.

Choerry, in the middle of the two class clowns, was staring silently up at the ceiling. She had been trying to sleep, but she was simply not tired. She found this happened every once in a while, even at home. She tossed and turned a few times, trying to make herself comfortable.

"Are your sleeping quarters insufficient princess?" Yeojin teases, startling Choerry a little.

"You scared me!" Choerry whispers in the darkness.

"You're flopping around like a fucking fish. Is everything good?" The smaller girl asks, some concern in her tone of mockery.

"Yeah. I'm just really awake. It happens, sometimes I can't sleep." Choerry responds.

It's silent before Choerry can feel a shift next to her. With her eyes adjusting, she can make out the outline of Yeojin standing up.

What was Yeojin supposed to do? Let her guest struggle to sleep in her own house?

"Come on, let's go downstairs and watch something. I'm not that tired either." Yeojin lies. "I don't want to wake them up to watch something in here."

Choerry smiles at Yeojin's offer, getting up and following the other girl out of her room and down the stairs. They make their way into the kitchen, which is dimly lit a soft yellow by the light beneath the microwave.

"I'm going to get some snacks first." Yeojin says. "You can get whatever you want, most of the snacks are in the pantry over there."

Yeojin gestures to a door near the refrigerator while she pulls a bowl out of a cupboard. Choerry walks over to the pantry door and opens it, taking a look at the variety of treats the Jos keep in their household. Choerry spots one of her favorite snacks and pulls a couple out.

"Oh Choerry could you grab some-" Yeojin cuts herself off when she sees that Choerry already has what she wants in her hands.

"What?" Choerry asks.

"I was going to ask for you to grab me a Fruit Roll-Up, but you already have them." Yeojin says. "Taste. They're one of my favorites."

"Mine too!" Choerry says excitedly.

It's funny really, Choerry thinks to herself, that she and Yeojin were not even acquaintances a few months ago. If she was being honest, she always thought Yeojin was really weird. Choerry knew for sure that Yeojin had thought she was annoying, so she didn't feel too bad about thinking this way. But now as they get closer, they only keep finding similarities between each other.

Choerry hadn't thought about it too much, but she realized that she had never had a best friend before. She was always just friends with everyone. Plus the closest she had ever gotten was Nayeon, and she definitely didn't count. Of course, now she had four close friends, but with Yeojin... it was like they just clicked. They were completely different, but that somehow balanced really nicely, and Choerry appreciated it.

"You can go to the living room, I'll be there in a sec." Yeojin says, climbing up on the counter. "My mom puts the good shit up here because she doesn't think I can reach it. Annoying, she's barely taller than me."

Choerry nods, walking to the living room as Yeojin opens the high cupboard doors to reveal a giant box of Extra-Cheddar.

After she pours a good amount of little fish into her bowl, Yeojin makes her way over to the couch next to Choerry.

"Sorry you couldn't sleep." Yeojin says, placing the bowl of Goldfish down and picking up the remote.

"Don't be sorry, it's not your fault." Choerry says, unwrapping one of her Fruit Roll-Ups

"I meaaaaaan yeah." Yeojin responds. "Well, at least you can stay up and remember how good your Valentine's day was right?"

Choerry hesitates, hyperfocusing on her unwrapping as if to avoid the question. Yeojin tilts her head.

"Okay, you look like you're constipated, so I'm going to take that as a no." Yeojin replies to her own question, popping a Goldfish into her mouth.

Choerry finally puts her Roll-Up down and sighs. "It was okay. I mean, being with you guys was a lot of fun, it's just... Chad's participation in it was really. Not what I was expecting."

Yeojin takes in her friend's response. "So, what were you expecting?"

Choerry thinks for a second before answering. "I thought... He would sweep me off my feet or something. I don't know. Like in movies, you see the boy set up romantic things for their girlfriends. My mom is surprising my other mom with a whole second honeymoon right now."

"Which one?" Yeojin asks mid-munch. "Which one is doing the surprising?"

Choerry scoffs. "The one whose ass you compared to a whale."

"Ohohohoh my God, I forgot about that," Yeojin needs to cover her mouth to keep herself from waking the entire house with her boisterous laughter. "Yeah, she hates me."

"She doesn't hate you. She doesn't hate anyone."

"No, I'm pretty sure she hates Scary Milf." Yeojin refutes knowingly.

“Scary Milf... Like the Spice Girls?” Choerry questions.

“Yeah, with milfs. The god tier ones all have a spot in the group.” Yeojin explains, making Choerry shake her head with a smile.

The class president sighs, remembering the point of their conversation. “I mean, I didn’t expect a romantic getaway or anything, but I just wanted something more than... a signed Kit-Kat.”

“Yeah all offense to him but he sucks ass. I don’t think his brain works right. But I digress...” Yeojin says, munching on another cheesy cracker.

“And I always do his homework and stuff... you’d think he would do something better. Like the assembly was fine but I don’t know... I don’t know maybe I’m overreacting?” Choerry finishes, beginning to play with the paper on her Roll-Up.

“No you’re not.” Yeojin reassures her. “You should really stop doing his homework though. People will pay you for that and he’s getting it for free? Nah he’s blocking your bag!”

Choerry chuckles but sighs shortly afterwards. Of course she had thought about it, knew it was wrong to help him cheat, but she feared that if she stopped he would like her less. What if he even broke up with her. (Of course, he wouldn’t break up with her because of the boost of popularity she gave him, but Choerry didn’t know that.) With everything in her life changing all at once... it was just overwhelming to think about.

“I don’t want to hurt his feelings.” Choerry responds.

“But he hurt your feelings today and didn’t even think about it.” Yeojin says flatly. “I’m just saying he definitely should’ve given you a better Valentine’s Day. You deserve it.”

“You think so? Why?” Choerry asks, her second question a noticeably softer than the first.

“Seriously?” Yeojin asks, looking the other girl in the eyes. “Choerry you’re... great. Like on God... you are the nicest person I’ve ever met. You genuinely care about... probably everyone you meet. I think you’re insane sometimes because of how sweet you are to people who don’t even deserve it. If anyone deserves to have that given back to them it’s you.”

Yeojin cringes a little after her sentence, not because it’s not true, but because she has never been so vulnerably honest with someone before.

Choerry’s eyes glisten at her friend’s words. “Thanks.”

Yeojin breaks her serious glance to flash a tiny smile. “Yeah, sure.”

“Hey Yeojin?” Choerry voices and the other girl looks back at her. “You’re like... kind of my best friend I think.”

Yeojin looks at her blankly for a second, and it makes Choerry nervous. However Yeojin lets out a small laugh.

“You’re ‘kind of my best friend I think’ too stupid.” Yeojin says grinning. “Don’t tell Yeri though.”

Choerry nods in agreement but then Yeojin lets out a groan.

“EW. I’m being way too nice right now. We need to watch something to get me out of this mood.

Like *Saw*. ” Yeojin starts flipping through the categories on Netflix.

“NOPE.” Choerry says, grabbing the remote from the other girl. “We’re gonna watch *To All The Boys I Loved Before*.”

“UGHGHhhHhhHH NoOoOooo.” Yeojin whines, sliding off the couch like a toddler throwing a fit.

“Okay okay, fine... happy medium?” Choerry asks, typing words into the search bar.

“PERIOD.” Yeojin bellows a little too loudly when she sees that Choerry has typed in ‘*Scott Pilgrim*.’ “The ignorant 2000s era writing will make me feel like an asshole and you’ll still get your romance storyline... genius I think.”

The girls start the movie and eat their snacks, nodding off before the movie even ends.

Choerry wakes up during the ending credits, a little disoriented at the flickering screen. She takes in her surroundings, noting that she is still in the Jo household. Once she realizes where she is, she feels a weight on her shoulder, only to see that it is Yeojin’s head resting on her.

Choerry smiles, moving a little to shake the sleeping girl lightly.

“Hey, let’s go back to the room. The movie is done.”

Yeojin shifts to flop opposite of Choerry and onto the couch. She groans, and Choerry gets up to be closer to her face. She pokes her cheek a few times.

“Yeojin come on.” Choerry says.

Yeojin groans again, swatting Choerry.

“I’ll play your mixtape during the next school announcements.” Choerry offers.

Suddenly Yeojin is up and walking towards the stairs, making Choerry roll her eyes. Yeojin stops to look back at the girl still on the couch.

“Well, are you gonna come with or what?” She asks.

With a smile, Choerry gets up and follows her friend back up the stairs.

Correction: her *best* friend.

Sunlight drips brightly into the comfortable wooden cabin’s master bedroom. The Kim wives lay under a heavy white comforter, Jungeun arising as the outdoor light slips into her eyeline.

She shuffles a little, laying flat on her stomach and squinting her eyes open to take in her surroundings. Peeking over her shoulder, she smiles, seeing her wife sleeping peacefully next to her, the woman’s breath on Jungeun’s neck.

She doesn’t know how the woman does it after years of marriage, but just waking up to Jinsol makes Jungeun feel like a giddy teenage girl. And when it comes to thinking about everything that happened last night in front of the fireplace, (and what continued when they made their way to the

bedroom) Jungeun can't help but feel her stomach flip with joy.

She smiles as she places her face back into her pillow for a second more, trying to gain the willpower to fully wake up. She turns to the side away from Jinsol in order to grab her phone. She actually hadn't looked at it since last night when they had gotten there and Jinsol had plugged it into the wall to charge.

She picks the device up, seeing she has one text from Jiwoo.

Jiwoo: So where did she end up taking you? She didn't KILL you did she???

Jungeun rolls her eyes at her friend's extreme jump to conclusions, (Even though she too had accused her wife of that early on in the trip) but taps on the small message bar to respond. She opens the camera to take a picture of the window in front of her, perfectly displaying some mountains covered with snow in the distance.

Jungeun: She took me to a really beautiful cabin!! Look at the gorgeous mountains!

Jungeun sends the text and scrolls through a few Instagram posts before a banner pops up on her phone that notifies her of a new response from her best friend.

Jiwoo: I too am in some gorgeous mountains. ;)

Jiwoo: [*Downloading...* 📶]

Jungeun reluctantly taps on Jiwoo's message and is unceremoniously attacked by a picture of Jiwoo's grinning face laying on what Jungeun can only assume is Sooyoung Ha's bare cheeks.

"AHHHHH!" Jungeun yelps loudly in horror, dropping the phone and covering her face.

Jinsol stirs at Jungeun's sudden noise, eventually wrapping her arms fully around her wife's body.

"What's wrong?" Jinsol asks, elevating herself slightly so that she can see Jungeun's covered face.

"You don't even want to know." Jungeun replies through her fingers. She slides them off her face so she can look up at her wife gazing down at her, love basically seeping out of her eyes. Jungeun's stomach fills with butterflies and she flips herself over so that she's now on top of Jinsol, leaning down to plant fresh kisses all over her wife's face.

"Good morning." Jungeun says holding herself over her wife, the sun hitting the back of her head perfectly, creating an ethereal glow around her figure. Jinsol has to remind herself to breathe.

"Good morning to you too." Jinsol giggles, reaching up to caress her wife's cheek. "What do you want to do today?"

Jungeun melts into Jinsol's hand and slowly lets herself down onto Jinsol's chest, letting out a sigh.

"Can I just... lay here with you? Is that an option?" She asks, looking up at the darker haired woman.

Jinsol smiles so big that Jungeun feels like her heart could explode. "Of course that's an option. Whatever you want."

Jungeun snuggles further into Jinsol's chest and the other woman begins to play with her hair.

“What did you want to do for breakfast though?” Jinsol asks curiously. “I can make us something in the kitchen.”

Jungeun whines at the thought of her wife leaving her side for longer than a few minutes. “Why don’t you just bring the leftovers from dinner in here and we can eat it on the bed.”

“But the crumbs!” Jinsol shrieks, clearly making fun of the fact that Jungeun hated when food spilled onto the bed in any setting.

“Fuck the crumbs!” Jungeun proclaims. Jinsol lets out a loud and exaggerated fake gasp, causing Jungeun to put her hand on Jinsol’s face disorientedly.

Jinsol removes her wife’s hand and intertwines her fingers with it. “Okay, breakfast in bed sounds great to me.”

“But can you wait a little bit longer? You’re *so* comfortable.” Jungeun asks, moving her head up to make eye contact with Jinsol.

“Like I said, whatever you want.” Jinsol replies. “Happy Valentine’s Birthday.”

“I love you,” Jungeun says with all her heart. “So, so much,” she smiles, and it lights up every corner of the room.

Jinsol feels a warmth radiate in her heart that only Jungeun could cause, and she adjusts herself to give her wife a kiss on the forehead.

“I love you too.”

As the afternoon sun just begins to sink from the sky, Hyejoo Ha is drawn out of her gaming cave by the rumbling of her stomach. The only sounds in the empty mansion are her steps down the grand foyer. Today is Sunday, and her mothers are scheduled to return home from their trip.

Well, Sooyoung and Jiwoo were actually due to return yesterday morning. But late Friday night, Jiwoo had called to inform their daughter that their trip was proving to be longer than expected, and they would not be arriving home Saturday at all.

To say the weekend without their presence in this estate of royal proportions was *lonely* is a severe understatement. Hyejoo is definitely not “best buds” with either of her mothers, but their company or even just the faint background noise of them chatting would have been better than the deafening silence of the empty home. They hadn’t even called in Hyunjin to stay with the child, since they thought they’d only be gone for a little less than a day. So their child has been eagerly anticipating their return.

Now, it’s around 5PM, and according to Jiwoo, Hyejoo should be expecting them soon. She figures they’ll probably have the means to a better dinner than anything the eighth grader could produce herself, so she elects to wait for that. A small snack should do.

Just as she’s reaching to open one of the cabinets of their luxurious walk-in pantry, her phone begins to buzz loudly in her hand.

Hyejoo looks at her screen to the familiar caller ID photo of the disturbingly close-up selfie of Jiwoo’s nostrils.

“Hello?”

“*Hi honey,*” Jiwoo says through the phone in a tone that Hyejoo recognizes as the one she uses when she has to painfully deliver bad news.

Somehow, without even needing to hear Jiwoo say anything, Hyejoo knows.

“You’re not coming,” Hyejoo delivers the news for her, lifelessly.

“*I’m so sorry sweetie, it’s just taken so much longer than expected and I-*”

“It’s okay,” Hyejoo cuts off softly. “Take your time.”

“...*Are you sure?*” Jiwoo’s worried voice pierces through the line.

And the child thinks to herself, *What else am I supposed to say?*

“Yeah. It’s alright,” she confirms, but the words are a little hard to say over the painful lump forming in her throat. Her breath is shaky, her vision clouding.

“*Sweetie, I’m so sorry-*”

“No, no it’s fine!” Hyejoo says with a little too much enthusiasm, especially considering how she barely shows any on a good day. “I’ll be fine Mom.”

“*Okay, we’re on our way right now. But we won’t be home until probably around midnight-*”

“That’s alright,” Hyejoo says quietly, and she still hears her small voice bounce across the walls, echoing through the empty home. The sound of it only cultivates the thorny ivy of emotion intrusively growing throughout her insides, curling around her heart and suffocating it until it can yearn no more. “It’s okay.”

There is a long pause before Hyejoo decides to end the conversation, because there’s nothing left to say, really. “Alright, be safe.”

“*I love you,*” Jiwoo says apologetically, and Hyejoo hears it loud and clear, but hangs up immediately upon its registration with a hint of supersaturated bitterness.

Hyejoo lowers the phone back into her pocket.

Hesitantly, she reaches for the box of Fruity Pebbles. She’s had Fruity Pebbles for three meals straight now. And yes, her mothers have accumulated quite the apocalyptic food supply in the pantry... which would be helpful if the eighth grader knew how to cook any of it.

The gaping empty rooms around her are so silent that Hyejoo can hear her own ears ring. The first few times her mothers had done something like this, Hyejoo was terrified of ghosts possibly lurking in every empty corridor. Now, she would welcome their company.

Still, it’s quiet in here.

She takes her bowl of cereal to the posh modern living room. Setting it down gently on the coffee table, she sits on the couch and doesn’t really feel like eating anymore.

Hyejoo hugs her knees to her chest, forlorn.

Her first desire is to call Chaewon. But that doesn’t really seem appropriate today, after the events

of this week. She should probably give her some space.

Maybe Choerry. *No, I'd only bring down her mood.*

Yejin, Yeri? They're probably engaging in one of their galavant antics. She doesn't want to be a bother.

That's about the end of her list. The cereal has gone soggy.

In her bedroom, before the sun has even gone down, the eighth grader climbs into her massive bed and covers herself in the thick black comforter. She's not sleepy, but staying awake any longer probably won't do her any good anyway.

With the curtains drawn closed, she closes her eyes and forces herself to sleep, trying her best to not ruminate any longer on the oversized, luxurious prison that she calls home.

It's around 8PM when Sooyoung and Jiwoo Ha finally arrive home. Initially, their estimated time of arrival from the air was midnight, but after her call with their daughter, Jiwoo had immediately ordered the plane home. She was tired of Sooyoung constantly elongating their tropospheric excursion, constantly *lying* that they'd make it home on time.

Raiding their private jet for any and all gourmet food to bring home to her daughter, they arrive to all of the mansion lights turned off. Setting the food on the counter and her bags beside it, Jiwoo rushes up their spiral staircase to check on their child. Sooyoung remains downstairs, absently scrolling through unopened business emails on her phone.

Jiwoo opens the door to Hyejoo's bedroom, expecting the middle schooler to be up at her desk tinkering with something or watching TV at the very least. She finds her asleep, and her heart drops in her chest.

Sooyoung's footsteps echo as the CEO ascends the spiral staircase.

"She's asleep," Jiwoo breathes quietly, as she peers through the door, watching Hyejoo's blanketed shoulders rhythmically rise and fall.

Sooyoung smirks. "We can continue with our weekend," she whispers teasingly, her honeyed voice for once shocking Jiwoo to her core.

How can anyone have so little concern for their child?

Jiwoo stares into the dark room, her mouth fallen open just a little. Sooyoung hums, getting closer to her and snaking an arm around her wife's waist.

The other mother just feels dirty, Sooyoung's noxiously blithe demeanor smothering her until her happy-go-lucky facade is just about to crack.

"Actually, I'm tired too," Jiwoo rejects softly as she wriggles out of the embrace. She closes their daughter's door with thousands of unsaid apologies lodged in her throat.

Jiwoo retreats to their bedroom, leaving Sooyoung at their daughter's shut door.

The executive's eyes glaze over the door, leaving without thinking anything about their little girl

behind it.

Chapter End Notes

straight couples during coronapocalypse quarantine: i want to k word my spouse and myself

msd!lipsoul: willingly puts themselves in quarantine completely isolated from society and it doesn't matter one bit because they are each other's best friend

Anyway I'm so excited to get back to our regularly scheduled programming of St. Jihyo's Presidential Academy PTA events, we have so much in store for you guys !!! We hope the long wait for this chapter was worth it. Thank you for your endless support and I hope all of your families are well during this troubling time. Much love <3

- Cat

my dogs name is zimmie. i bet yall were wondering that the entire time you were reading. did you like the chapter??? 2jin or hyunlia??? VISEUL???? LIPSOUL?? HYEWON??? YVES' MOUNTAINS??? TELL US WHAT YOU LIKED! omg also did we all listen to wannabe by itzy that song is so fucking good. - daniela

- curiouscat.me/catmsdqna (Cat)

Dinner & Spoken Word

Chapter Notes

Thank you for waiting <3 - Cat

hola muchachalatas - daniela

✧ TW: There is a MILD bit during the event of the chapter where suicidal ideation is mentioned in first-person. It is definitely not a lot, but we just wanted to put a TW for the safety of our readers.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Irene Kang allows a brief glance to the top right of her MacBook screen. The clock reads **7:52 AM** on this March morning. The aggravated woman rolls her eyes, glaring at herself on the computer screen as the green light from the camera hits the top of her shiny pale forehead.

The PTA President was waiting for her oh so beloved school boss, Principal Haseul, to join the Zoom call (something she was *supposed* to do two minutes ago).

Irene still feels residual sleep tugging down her eyelids, and grabs her brown bear mug filled with favorite green tea. Her beloved wife Seulgi had left it for her, knowing she would have an early morning meeting. Seulgi had also left her a stress ball next to the soothing drink; her thoughtfulness being another reason why Irene is still in love with her to this day.

Just as the stern woman leans in to take a sip, a notification from Zoom *finally* arrives alerting her that **jomama@stjihyos.edu** has requested to join the meeting.

Irene takes a strained breath, then accepts the principal's request to join the call.

She sets her bear mug down and squints annoyed at the computer screen. She can only see what she assumes are Haseul's nostrils positioned unnaturally close to the computer camera.

"Haseul move back, you are too close." Irene says sharply.

Haseul adjusts the camera multiple times, up and down, missing center constantly and showing only either her forehead or her chin and t-shirt that reads "**I'm Not a Gynecologist But I'll Take a Look**" (Irene nearly had a stroke when Haseul wore that to school once, but the principal explained that she thought a gynecologist was someone who hemmed jeans. Apparently she had never seen the spelling of the word before, or pronunciation.) After a few frustrating minutes of this, Haseul's full face is now visible, her smile wide as she frantically waves at Irene.

The principal's green screen behind her head materializes, and it is a picture of Guy Fieri floating in space.

"Hi Renie!" Principal Haseul mouths through the screen, voiceless. She doesn't seem to know she is muted. "*Can you hear me?*"

Irene is about to tell her she's muted, but the voice catches in her throat. She likes it better this way.

For a second, she just stares with a content smile at Haseul chattering silently.

“*Oh, I think I’m muted,*” Haseul mouths, and Irene’s smile drops.

Haseul unmutes herself. “HOLA RENIE!” she screams, bouncing off every wall of Irene’s minimalistic white home office and nearly making the PTA President spill her tea all over her keyboard.

Irene closes her eyes and massages the bridge of her nose in stress.

“Irene?”

“Yes Haseul.” Irene snaps.

“How’s it hanging?” Haseul asks, to which Irene ignores.

“Well. You neglected to tell me that today’s PTA meeting would be *online* until after I arrived early . ”

“Yeah, but isn’t that great!” Haseul chirps, always the early bird. “You get to stay in the comfort of your own home!”

“I *drove* to the *school* , Haseul,” Irene says through grit teeth. She went to St. Jihyo’s already low on sleep, only to be greeted by various construction workers saying that a certain principal had ordered for the spontaneous weekend construction of a swimming pool of Olympic proportions. Irene had not been informed.

Haseul snorts subtly from her chair. “Someone made an oopsies!”

Irene glares at her and she can feel the piercing through the screen.

Haseul chuckles awkwardly. “At least we’re here now! So, why did you want to talk to me ten minutes before the meeting?”

Irene stares back at Haseul with dead eyes. “Well, I was *going* to discuss the business I plan to address in this meeting, but it seems that we only have one minute left. So I will allow a brief rundown.”

“PERFECT okay yes!” Haseul sends Irene a way-too-enthusiastic thumbs up.

“We’re going to plan the annual Dinner & Spoken Word competition on call today. As you know, our school will be *hosting* this year, so our PTA parents must provide resources,” Irene says sternly. The interscholastic poetry contest was always a hit with every eighth grade class throughout the archdiocese, so much so that the event never even needed a hefty prize.

“Today’s meeting will only include the PTA’s highest donors and most active members,” Irene continues, “so it will just be a small group-”

“Boo!” Haseul interrupts. “I thought this was going to be a party!”

“...This is a professional meeting Haseul. Please do not *heckle* me.”

The clock strikes 8AM, and Irene as the host of the Zoom call receives an influx of requests to join the meeting. The PTA president accepts all the email addresses she recognizes.

One at a time, St. Jihyo’s PTA parents pop up onscreen.

Irene meets the kind eyes of Jinsol Kim first, as she smiles in front of her house's ocean view. The glare from the screen reflects off of her big, round glasses (Jinsol didn't want to put her contacts on so early in the morning). The women say their hellos to each other, while Haseul is ridiculously sending finger guns to anyone who speaks.

"Good morning every-" Irene starts, but she is interrupted by the ping of one more notification.

SOOYOUNG@YSL.com *would like to join your meeting!*

Irene has to bite her lip to stop from audibly groaning. She hits accept.

Within seconds, Sooyoung Ha fully materializes, and looms over her grandiose office desk like a supervillain. The other CEO is significantly more put together than any of the other parents on the call, donning complete business attire despite it being barely 8 in the morning. Even her background stands out; the modern luxury of her home office's interior design is alive and well behind her.

"Good morning," the rich Korean billionaire in the world greets in her silky, poisonous voice.

Sooyoung notices Jinsol first, her eyes slightly narrowed aggressively behind her giant spectacles. "Jesus Christ," Sooyoung whispers to herself lowly as she takes in the alarming sight of Jinsol, who quite frankly looks like Steve Urkel. Jinsol glares at her as if she can read her mind.

"Sooyoung. Thank you for joining us." Irene nearly spits out. Before Sooyoung can respond, Irene continues, regaining her professional composure. "Okay, welcome everyone! Thank you for using your technical skills with us today for this emergency Zoom meeting. My apologies for not being able to hold it at the school," she says in a snippy tone, once again reminded of how confused the construction workers looked trying to understand Haseul's hand-drawn blueprints.

"Today we are just going to finalize the nitty gritty of our upcoming event, the annual Dinner & Spoken Word competition that will be put together this year by our academy's PTA. As you all know, it is happening this Friday, and some of you might have children themselves who will be participating. They will be asked at school today to sign up and I will email a list of all the competitors by this afternoon. All participants will be rewarded extra credit for joining from their respective schools, so we are anticipating a good turn out.

"First and foremost, I want to address the venue. Haseul was in charge of securing the location, so Haseul, if you could please tell us where you have chosen to hold the event this ye-"

"CHEESECAKE FACTORY!" Haseul screeches like a little girl while every other PTA member winces in the Zoom gallery view. Sooyoung makes a face like she's just smelled rotten fish.

"Oh Haseul, the lighting is bad in there-" Jinsol starts pitifully.

"Yes I agree, Haseul. Jinsol can't even see *now*, how can you expect her to see then?" Sooyoung panders.

"I was saying that because it's called Dinner and SPOKEN WORD. The kids have to SEE THE WORDS TO READ ."

A new parent speaks up for once. "We can give them flashlights; up the theatrics!"

"Soyeon that is the worst idea I have ever heard," Sooyoung snaps point blank.

"Or we could-" Jinsol starts.

“Nevermind, Soyeon, *that* was the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” Sooyoung remarks.

The other parents become nervous at the tension building between the two CEOs, despite it being completely expected at this point.

“I didn’t even finish my sentence!”

Sooyoung rolls her eyes. “Quiet Jinsol, you look like the senile woman at the beginning of *Ratatouille*.”

“...You’ve seen *Ratatouille*?” Principal Haseul asks curiously.

“Yes, in fact I was invited to the premiere in 2009,” the sophisticated businesswoman answers. “I have friends on the cast.” She doesn’t really (have any friends); it’s just one of Jiwoo’s favorite movies.

Jinsol narrows her eyes. “Name one of your friends on that cast.”

“Disney,” Sooyoung retorts. “Mr. Disney. Walt.”

“Walt Disney is dead,” Jinsol squints, while the other PTA mothers look to Sooyoung for a rebuttal.

“Oh Jinsol... Tsk tsk... If you were on the board of trustees...” Sooyoung says cryptically. “Then you would understand...”

Irene from her own home narrows her eyes into confused little slits. “What are insinuating about this dead man Sooyoung?”

“I’ve said too much,” Sooyoung says plainly, and Jinsol rolls her eyes while Haseul is stunned at the validating information for her theory that they froze Walt Disney in carbonite.

“AS I WAS SAYING!” Irene practically yells.

“Where is this even happening? Smack dab in the middle of a Cheesecake Factory?!” Sooyoung asks with distaste.

“I reserved the private banquet area upstairs! You can see all the boats and the ocean, you will love it!” Haseul says like a child in a toy store. She’s mostly excited for Cheesecake Factory’s signature brown bread, and that’s pretty much the only reason why she chose the venue. But no one needs to know that.

“Haseul is that going to be able to fit multiple schools of eighth graders?!” Irene asks.

Sooyoung clears her throat. “I already purchased hibachi tables for this event, Irene.”

“No one asked you to do that.” Irene snaps.

Jinsol laughs a little bit, trying to keep down a smile. “You’re gonna put Benihana tables in a Cheesecake Factory? As in, we’re going to eat in a Cheesecake Factory, but not eat the food of the restaurant we’re in?”

“Private chefs are the only way to save this school from the monstrosity of Cheesecake Factory.” Sooyoung snips.

“Sooyoung that is... That is brilliant,” Haseul breathes out, the most high class restaurants she

knows fusing into one Catholic middle school poetry extravaganza. “Except maybe we should keep the bread on the menu. We can talk about it later.”

“How are you going to make that work?” Jinsol critiques, not wasting an opportunity to rip her archnemesis apart. “Just cancel it, it’s not going to hurt to have a glass of lemonade for once in your life-”

“Don’t be barbaric Jinsol, I can’t just cancel my order. This isn’t a Chuck Entertainment Cheese,” Sooyoung snaps.

“...Chuck E. Cheese ?”

“Oh, *you* would know,” the other CEO sneers.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Jinsol retorts.

“I’m just saying tha-” Sooyoung is suddenly cut off as Irene mutes both CEOs for everyone in the Zoom call.

“I’m 1/15th Latina, you know,” Principal Haseul chimes in, trying to fill the silence.

There is a long pause before Irene decides to regain control of the conversation. “Alright. The bottom line is that this year’s Dinner & Spoken Word will be at the Cheesecake Factory at...?”

The parents wait for Haseul to clarify which location, but she is just sitting in her chair and smiling.

“Haseul. Which Cheesecake Factory.” Irene says monotonously.

“OH um, here this one let me-uh oh!” Haseul is now sharing her screen with everyone by accident.

Her wallpaper is three minions chasing after each other and a small window is opened to a YouTube video that reads:

DIY CRAFTS: FIREWORKS (YOU WILL NEED: 128 Matches, TNT, a PLASTIC BOTTLE) - uploaded by Chuu

“Wrong tab! But should we watch this?” Haseul hovers her cursor over the play button before she’s met with a resounding chorus of ‘No’s, save one ‘Absolutely’ from Sooyoung who is now glaring at everyone else.

Haseul, one by one, exits her other tabs, which include more Youtube videos like:

How to redirect a bullet with your bare hands (WITH DEMONSTRATION) - uploaded by Chuu

My wife doing TAXES for 2 hours while i cook sexy tomato soup in the background-
uploaded by Chuu

ASMR: I’m Comforting You As You Pull The Plug On Your Dad - uploaded by Chuu

Her last tab, Google Maps, now provides a clear view of a Cheesecake Factory location on the pier of a nearby Southern California beach. “This is the one!”

The mothers jot down the location. Haseul turns her screenshare off once she sees that they are

done, showing a gallery view of the parents once more.

“The servers put extra sugar on the lemonade rims at this location and the chicken nuggets are to DIE FOR. Seriously I almost died once, you always need to chew your food. I learned that the hard way! Honestly though, you can’t find a better Cheesecake Factory in an-”

Haseul doesn’t finish because Irene makes the executive decision to mute her as well.

“Alright!” Irene forces a smile onto her face, looking at the remaining PTA mothers. “Now for decorations. Remember, this is not *just* a St. Jiho’s competition. This event is going to be a representation of our school to the other sister schools within the Mother Mina Coalition, so it must look presentable. Can I count on the usual decorative leaders?”

A few parents nod their heads and give thumbs ups. Jinsol sends a clapping emoji, and Principal Haseul is still speaking, seemingly unaware that she has been muted.

“Great! The theme for the night is- oh for the love of god. Seriously, Sooyoung?”

Irene is looking at Sooyoung’s box, where she has changed her virtual background to a notes app screencap that reads **Jinsol is stupid.** in small text.

Irene rolls her eyes and just as Jinsol is about to give Sooyoung the finger, she turns off everyone’s video. Everyone’s display is now multicolor screens of their initials.

“Anyway. The decorations will be coming in soon and I will let you all know when that occurs. That’s about all I wanted to talk about here, did anyone have any questions?”

Irene waits a beat, no one speaking out vocally, then the chat pings.

Sooyoung Ha, CEO: And what about my Hibachi tables?

Irene sighs deeply. “Mrs. Ha if you insist on Hibachi tables there, please email me your plan on transporting them to the second floor of the Redondo Beach Cheesecake Factory. Is that all?”

Again, questions are asked, and Irene lets out a breath of relief. “Then I will send out a memo with what we’ve covered here and further details on the night within the hour. Goodbye!”

Irene doesn’t wait to hear farewells before ending the meeting immediately, picking up the stress ball on her desk as she slams her MacBook shut.

Meanwhile, at the apex of Beverly Hills, Sooyoung closes the Zoom window with a scoff. She is seconds away from dialing up her Hibachi guy in her modern black office when familiar gentle footsteps are heard in the hallway.

From her lush supervillain chair, the CEO looks up to see Jiwoo enter her office with sleepy, half-lidded eyes.

Sooyoung puts her phone down. “Hi sweetheart,” she says in the gentlest tone she’s used all morning.

Jiwoo yawns with a hand covered over her mouth as she leans on the side of her wife’s desk. “Do you want coffee?” she offers, her normally chipper voice still riddled with sleep.

Sooyoung smiles, feeling her heart soften. “That would be wonderful,” she responds, matching her wife’s low volume.

“What are you going to do without me when you need coffee next week?” Jiwoo asks half jokingly. The celebrity had a flight Friday night, right after Hyejoo’s Dinner & Spoken Word event. Jiwoo is set to be on the cast of MasterChef Junior, with filming starting that Monday. Her flight was set for Friday evening, and Sooyoung was happy for her.

But she was slightly uneasy about her leaving, seeing the way things seemed to be... just a bit *off* between them recently. Jiwoo smiles a bit, but then straightens herself to walk to the kitchen. Sooyoung reaches for her cold hand before she does.

“Wooming,” she calls. “We barely got to talk last night,” Sooyoung says, referring to not just last night, but most nights lately - although she’d been coming home at her regular late times, Jiwoo had been sleeping early. If Sooyoung didn’t know any better, it was almost like her wife was avoiding her.

Maybe Jiwoo was PMSing, Sooyoung thinks to herself. *It would explain the lack of sex.*

“I’m just tired,” Jiwoo whispers, her half-lidded eyes looking completely closed as they fixate on the overpriced imported rug beneath her feet. She secretly hopes Sooyoung would just drop it - both her hand and the current conversation.

Sooyoung doesn’t. “Are you sure?” she prods, concerned at Jiwoo’s uncharacteristic lethargy. Gently, she rubs her thumb over the back of her wife’s palm with concerned eyes. “Is everything okay?”

Jiwoo nods forcibly. “Everything’s fine,” she says, not being able to stop thinking about their daughter for days. And, truthfully, about Sooyoung’s role as a mother.

Is it always going to be this way?

But Jiwoo forces a smile as she meets her beloved’s eyes.

She can only hope it gets better soon.

Suddenly, Jiwoo gets a ping on her phone.

“But *this* ... is not okay.”

Sooyoung moves to look at her wife’s screen. Pulled up is an email from a sender under a familiar name.

Her stomach drops at the sight, recognizing the name of her mother.

“How long have they been trying to reach you?” The CEO asks sharply.

“Only now,” Jiwoo sighs.

Sooyoung takes the phone a bit aggressively and scans the email, but sees bits and pieces of a letter asking Jiwoo to bring Hyejoo to see them.

She is a troubled mother for not letting us meet our granddaughter, who we, regardless, love

very much. We can only entrust that you will not be the same.

The timing of the email could not have been worse, especially with everything on Jiwoo's mind lately. She immediately brings her phone down from their eyesight.

"Don't listen to her okay?" The shorter wife says. "They are not important to us. We made that choice a long time ago. ...I'm just going to block them, alright?"

Sooyoung nods firmly as Jiwoo brings the phone back up to report the sender. The CEO can feel anger forming in the pit of her stomach.

"It's like it was never even there!" Jiwoo says, faux enthusiastically. "Everything will be okay."

Sooyoung gives her wife a small smile in return, still a bit doubtful. She lifts Jiwoo's hand and presses a kiss to the place her thumb had been. "Thank you honey," she whispers.

And Jiwoo smiles at her, because she knows that underneath anything Sooyoung presents to others is a soft, sweet center.

Jiwoo wonders if her daughter will ever get to see it.

"No like, I saw Madonna once."

"Yeri you know damn well that wasn't Madonna." Chaewon retorts.

The girls are sitting in their favorite class bright and early. Today's assignment is to freestyle draw, so Ms. Wong has allowed the class to sit where they want. Which obviously led to the group of middle schoolers clustering together at one single table.

"It was her!" Yeri shouts.

"Why the fuck would Madonna be at a Dairy Queen on a Sunday." Hyejoo questions.

"She's human! Like all of us." Yeri replies.

"You *know* that was the MANAGER and it was just some random ass lady. Give it up." Yeojin points her marker at her friend.

The girls are too busy arguing to notice Principal Haseul sticking her head into the room slowly, hoping to not alarm her favorite art teacher sitting at her desk.

With the school year turning its final lap, Haseul had started to become so busy with school board events that she hadn't really gotten the chance to talk to Vivi. Not that she really knew what to say to her after that anyway.

Vivi finally notices Haseul slowly creeping into her classroom and starts to giggle. Regardless of how nervous the woman made her since she opened up a month ago, she still had a way of brightening her day. She waves her over and Haseul finally picks up the pace, making her way to the teacher's desk.

"Good morning, Principal." Vivi says formally as Haseul approaches, her cheeks going red from the attention.

"Long time no see aha!" Haseul chuckles awkwardly, jingling her St. Jihyo's lanyard between her

fingers. She catches a whiff of her passion fruit perfume, and almost feels queasy, remembering how Vivi felt leaning on her shoulder in the sand.

“Don’t worry about it,” Vivi says, a small smile on her face. “I’ve been flooded with things too.”

It doesn’t make any sense to Haseul, but Vivi’s smile still comforts her undeniably, despite the immense discomfort she feels. Her stomach flutters and the principal wants to punch herself in the face for it.

She had spent plenty of nights preoccupied with how odd their relationship truly was after what was said all those nights ago.

Was she a friend? A best friend?

...More?

But the principal can’t stay away from the art teacher, regardless of how hard she may try.

“I won’t have to worry about too much paperwork anymore, actually! I’m getting an assistant. Volunteer from that one high school down the hill... Dalla High? So we should be seeing each other more!” Haseul’s eyes widen at her own bluntness. “I mean- around the halls and such-”

“That’d be amazing.” Ms. Wong reassures her. “I’m pretty busy myself too though. I wish I could just get an assistant!”

“Say no more.” Haseul responds without an ounce of self control. “I can get one for you! These high schoolers will do anything for college applications. I wonder how much I could give her before it constitutes as child labor... Well-”

“What? No, Haseul, it’s alright I was just-”

“It’s already done.” Haseul smiles bashfully, and Vivi feels her heart rate pick up the pace in her chest. The principal doesn’t even know how she was going to do it but she was sure she could find a way. They stare at each other for a second, eyes shining before Haseul snaps herself out of it.

“Oh um, I should probably, you know, do what I came here to do...”

“Right!” Vivi says, standing and moving to the center of the classroom. “Attention everyone!” she calls out to the class, and immediately everyone turns. “Principal Haseul is here to deliver an announcement. Please give her your undivided attention and utmost respect.”

“Oh great, Big Bird’s here.” Yeojin says from the front table, making the other girls giggle.

Haseul strikes an odd pose, like she couldn’t decide between a dab or a whip. “Eighth grade Saints! Wazzaaaap! How are we DOING!”

The class stares back at her silently.

“Alright! GOOD!” she cheers, while Yeojin snorts. “I am here to inform you that we are having our annual spoken word competition with the rest of the Mother Mina Coalition this Friday!” the principal chirps like an animated character.

“Who here likes Cheesecake Factory!” Haseul shouts happily. Hesitantly, many students raise their hands.

“Who likes Benihana!” Even more students put up a hand.

“Now imagine... those two things... in one thing... AND you get extra credit for coming.”

“Oh my god, just like you described your fantasy wedding!” Yeojin says sarcastically, making the entire class burst into laughter.

“Hahaha, very funny,” Haseul responds, not minding the humiliation at all. “But I’m serious guys. This is a chance to get free, HIGH CLASS food. Everyone give a big thank you to Hyejoo’s mothers!”

“Milf,” an unknown boy shouts from the back, causing Hyejoo to turn and glare angrily. Choerry, seated right next to her, wonders if they’ll both have to deal with this for the rest of their lives. It really doesn’t help that Haseul changed the school motto to

ST JIHYO’S PRESIDENTIAL ACADEMY: *HOME OF THE MILFS*

...and that it’s plastered in giant letters on the website and marquee outside.

“The extra credit, should you choose to sign up, will go towards *any* class of your choosing. So, who would like to participate!”

All of the kids shift uncomfortably, staying planted in their seats. Someone coughs.

“Come on guys! Poetry is important to society, especially at your age!” She looks around the room of eighth graders again to still be met with silence. Vivi fights the urge to laugh, but admires Haseul’s resilience.

“You all need to *express yourself*. I know you all experience a lot of *angst*. I too... experience... angst.” Haseul reassures.

“Yeah, while you read Fifth Harmony fanfiction.” Yeojin says, loud enough for her mother at the front of the class to hear her.

“Yes! I loved your newest chapter, Yeojin!” she cheers completely serious while Yeojin turns beet red, and the class behind her erupts into hysterics once again.

“This is your chance to give a TED Talk! Have you ever seen a TED Talk? I watched a pretty good one the other day about bicycle seats and their impact on your behind. Literally! When you sit on one, it impacts-”

“Can I perform your Saturday morning Zumba routine?” Yeojin speaks up once more, her friends trying to hold it together.

“YES!” Haseul responds enthusiastically, much to Yeojin’s dismay. “You can do whatever you want! You just have to speak words. Pretty self explanatory!”

Vivi grows a confused look on her face - knowing that’s not at all what a performance spoken word is - but she doesn’t have the heart to correct her in front of the class.

“I’ll do it!” Choerry smiles, not wanting to let Principal Haseul down either.

“Perfect!” Haseul says, scribbling her name down. “Come on everyone! This is a time to speak from your heart!”

“What about a *performance*.” Yeri says.

“Yes, we are expecting performances.” Haseul answers.

“No. I mean a *performance*.”

Haseul tilts her head as if thinking hard, then nods. “Yes!”

“Sign me up,” Yeri says, then looks around her as if expecting applause.

“Do it, it will be fun!” Choerry nudges Yeojin at her other side. Yeojin squints at Haseul at the front of class.

“Alright fine whatever. But if I fight one of those bitches from As One Catholic, that’s on you. Someone owes me money.”

“Who? And for what?” Hyejoo questions.

“None of your *FUCKING* business.” Yeojin whispers. (No one owes her any money. She just really fucking hates that school.)

“Alright, alright! Stop begging me, I’ll do it.” Chaewon says, flipping her hair. “For the fans.”

The blonde middle schooler then looks over at Hyejoo expectantly.

Hyejoo stays silent for a moment, not knowing what to say. Speaking in front of a crowd was not necessarily her favorite pastime. In fact, she despised it.

But the way Chaewon was looking at her... well...

And Principal Haseul did say this was a time to speak from the heart...

“Okay,” Hyejoo says firmly, tearing her eyes away from her crush to look at their principal. “Put my name down too.”

Today is Friday, the day of Mother Mina’s Coalition of Catholic Schools’ Dinner & Spoken Word competition hosted by St. Jihyo’s Presidential Academy.

The soft clinking of plates fills the banquet floor of the Cheesecake Factory. Volunteers from St. Jihyo’s have shown up early to help set up the event area, placing plates down on tables. Well, the tables that were set up already. Half of the hibachi tables have been placed already while the other half make their way up the stairs in the arms of workers Irene was monitoring very closely.

Choerry struggles to place name cards on one of the tables as Yeri sits silently with her AirPods in. She is staring very intently at her phone, tapping her screen every once in a while.

The class president had arrived early to help decorate the school event. Her parents were with the other parents prepping the stage. She looks up at her mothers who are working together to untangle Haseul who seems to have gotten caught up in some wires. (That might be an understatement, the principal basically looks like she was attacked by several spiders webs.)

Choerry shuffles through the cards out of boredom but she stops once she sees Nayeon’s name. Of course she had known the bully would be in attendance tonight, but it was still unsettling to think about, even though they hadn’t had a bad encounter since Hyejoo’s incident in the gym.

Choerry lets out a sigh and just puts the cards down, making her way to the seat next to Yeri. The

girl was the only other child in the room, since Yeojin disappeared to the kitchen in order to “swindle the cheesecake recipe.” At least, that’s what Yeojin had texted the group chat when Choerry had asked where she was.

omw to pull a PLANKTON. i’ll be up before it starts tho. Yeojin had texted.

Choerry might have asked her to come help, but it’s not like any of them could do much decorating until all the furniture was set up anyway.

“What are you doing?” She asks Yeri, hoping her classmate’s airpod volume was low enough to hear her question.

“Making a masterpiece.” Yeri smiles and then turns her phone around so Choerry can see.

Yeri taps play on the screen to show a collage of clips of herself, changing to the beat of Savage by Megan Thee Stallion, a heavy filter over it that makes sparkles appear every two seconds.

One clip isn’t even Yeri, it’s Ariana Grande, but Choerry doesn’t comment.

“You made this?” Choerry asks.

“Yeah I made my mom record me performing different songs and then I added them here. One of them wasn’t even me, did you notice?”

“Um.. nope!” Choerry lies.

“UGH I knew it. I knew Ariana and I were twins...” Yeri says, turning the phone back to herself.

A crash comes from the stage, scaring both girls and the rest of the room. They look up and see that Haseul is face down still tangled in wires as the Kims and a few other moms shuffle around her.

“I’M GOOD.” Haseul shouts, her mouth muffled by the floor.

Yeri and Choerry start to giggle as Haseul wriggles around.

“Gosh, this is worse than the time someone tied my legs together with Twizzlers when I fell asleep at recess.” Choerry says, a snort coming out as she laughs.

“Oh yeah you woke up and fell off the bench right into mud!” Yeri chuckles.

“Wait how did you know about that?” Choerry asks, a confused look on her face as her laughing dies down.

Yeri’s laughter also comes to a halt. “Uh... Yeojin actually was the one that did that.”

Choerry’s smile wavers nervously. “Oh.”

“No, don’t worry. That was like, a lifetime ago. Yeojin definitely would never do that to you now. She really respects you more I think. We all do.”

“Really?” Choerry questions.

“Yeah! You’re pretty cool and you make us all feel... happy I guess. I mean even Olivia thinks so too.” Yeri replies.

“Wait seriously?”

“Well the other day she said ‘The weather is nice today.’ And she’s never said that before, so.”

Choerry smiles and Yeri smiles back. The class president tries her best not to feel overwhelmed. She’s never felt appreciation from friends like this before. She likes it.

“Well, can I help you now? My edit is done anyway.” Yeri asks.

Choerry shakes her head. “Nah. We have to wait until all the tables are in place and-”

“LIFT WITH YOUR LEGS. WERE YOU BORN YESTERDAY? LET’S PICK UP THE PACE.” Irene screams at a worker breaking a sweat as they try to get yet another table up the stairs.

“It might take a while.” Choerry finishes.

“Do you want to see my performance videos then? You’d probably like it, a fellow performer.” Yeri asks.

Choerry looks at her questioningly and Yeri rolls her eyes. “I know you can sing too. I remember you in the car.”

Choerry smiles brightly. “Yeah! Maybe we can collab.” She starts wiggling her eyebrows.

“Okay let’s not go that far.” Yeri says, shuffling over to be closer to Choerry. “Maybe a small feature.”

Choerry laughs as Yeri hits play on her phone.

“Which house is it again sweetie?”

Hyejoo looks up from the PUBG mobile app to see her perkier mother looking back at her with her eyebrows lifted in question.

“I remember this is the neighborhood...” Jiwoo mumbles. Even though Jiwoo had picked up Chaewon before, the smaller blonde was the one usually getting dropped off at the Ha estate.

“Mmmm...” Hyejoo moves her eyes towards the window to see familiar hanging trees engulfing their surroundings. She nods to confirm her mother’s guess. “Take a right on the next block. It’s the little tan one with the bushes.”

Sooyoung initiates the turn signal from the driver’s seat of their Mercedes while Jiwoo reaches back to pinch Hyejoo’s cheeks. “That’s my little GPS!”

Hyejoo cringes and shakes her head out of her mother’s grasp. Her stomach flips a little when their car pulls up to the house Hyejoo had described and she holds her own exposed arms. Sooyoung had made her leave her usual sweatshirt at home, forcing her to wear a short sleeved black dress, insisting that she dress up for the event today. No matter how many times Hyejoo had complained about the casual dress code for the night.

You have to look better than everyone else. How else would you stand out to the judges? Sooyoung had said at home, quite hurtfully, Hyejoo might add. Apparently Hyejoo’s writing talent wouldn’t be enough for her mother, but the middle schooler can’t say she was surprised by that.

Jiwoo had overheard and was only further upset by the dynamic, but as usual, the bubbly woman forced it down. But she made sure to stash one of Hyejoo's sweatshirts in her large bag to give to her daughter after the performance.

"Is Chaewon participating in the spoken word as well? Or is she just attending to hang out with you guys?" Jiwoo asks.

"She's speaking." Hyejoo replies, smiling subconsciously. "She's really talented actually, with like, writing things. She has songs and stuff."

Sooyoung, looking in the rear-view mirror, notices a sparkle in her daughter's eyes as she talks about her crush. She puts the car in park.

"Hyejoo go knock on the door and let your girlfriend know we're ready for her." Sooyoung says, pulling down the mirror to check her hair.

"YOU GUYS ARE DATING?!" Jiwoo screeches, startling both Hyejoo and Sooyoung. "AND YOU TOLD HER BEFORE ME?"

Hyejoo's face is beet red and her shoulders are tense. "NO! We're NOT! I never told her anything!"

"I just assumed." Sooyoung says, still fixing herself in the mirror. "Are you not dating?"

Hyejoo feels her shoulders fall slightly, so she picks them back up immediately. "No."

"Oh. But you like her?" Sooyoung makes eye contact with Hyejoo through the mirror.

"No--"

"You're very red right now. Like a little tomato." Sooyoung cuts her off matter of factly before she can finish denying it.

"A *cute* little tomato!" Jiwoo squeals from the passenger's side.

"I should get to know her more since this is the case." Sooyoung says.

"NO." Hyejoo barks. "DON'T be weird."

"I'm just trying to see if she will assimilate well into this family." Sooyoung defends in a lofty, regal tone.

Hyejoo grumbles, turning her phone to its vertical position and opening up the Messages app.

TO: chae

Hyejoo: hi we're outside

It only takes seconds for the typing bubbles to appear from the other end of the chat.

Chaewon: YAY

Chaewon: my mom was getting ready to classical music and i was about to blow my brains out. anyway omw :)

Within seconds, Chaewon appears opening the door, the setting sun reflecting off of her bright pink

t-shirt and jeans. Her pink high tops hit the cement as she jogs towards the car.

Hyejoo already feels overdressed, but self consciously smooths out the skirt of her dress anyway. Sooyoung notices, of course, in the rear-view mirror.

“Hi Chaewon!” Jiwoo exclaims as the blonde opens the door and climbs in.

“Hi Mrs. Ha! Hi other Mrs. Ha!” Chaewon replies in a sweet chirpy voice, buckling herself into the seat next to Hyejoo and closing the door.

The smaller girl looks over at her closest friend, who is furiously adjusting the fabric of her dress.

“So fancy,” Chaewon remarks softly as she buckles in her seatbelt, causing Hyejoo to stop and look her in the eyes.

“Is- is that good?” Hyejoo asks, dumbfounded and nervous.

“So Chaewon.” Sooyoung cuts in before Chaewon can answer. “My daughter says you are good with words. Please elaborate.”

Jiwoo’s eyebrows knit together as she turns to her wife. “Honey this isn’t a job interview-”

“You said that?” Chaewon smiles and Hyejoo tries to hide her face which is getting redder and redder by the second.

“Well!” Chaewon huffs, irreverently making direct eye contact with Sooyoung in the rear-view mirror. “I’m an artist. I write all my own tracks *obviously*. I also produce them but I don’t want to brag.” Chaewon says, pretending to file her nails even though there is no nail file anywhere near her.

“Oh really?” Sooyoung pushes. “So you sing.”

“Occasionally! Mostly I dabble in the art of rap.”

“Oh wow,” Sooyoung says, biting back laughter. “You’re a rapper?”

“I prefer lyricist. Wordsmith. Poetess.”

“She’s a rapper,” Hyejoo answers her own mother.

“I didn’t know that Chaewon!” Jiwoo chirps with a big smile while Hyejoo sees Sooyoung sucking in her lips.

“Could you show us any of these... raps?” Sooyoung asks.

“No.” Chaewon says straightforwardly and Hyejoo smirks in admiration at her defiance against Sooyoung. “I haven’t copyrighted all of them yet. You could steal my rhymes.”

The CEO narrows her eyes. “...Why would anyone do that?” Sooyoung asks.

“You tell me Mrs. Ha,” the eighth grader says. “Life is a school and everyone’s majoring in JEALOUSY.” Chaewon says, Hyejoo nodding along like it was the smartest thing she’s ever heard in her life and should be put on a T-shirt.

Jiwoo giggles like she’s just another one of their classmates, but Sooyoung blinks hard, perplexed.

“And what do you plan to major in?” Sooyoung counters. “In college.”

“Sooyoung-” Jiwoo starts disapprovingly.

“I’m not going to college. I don’t need it.” Chaewon asserts, *very* sure of herself, while Sooyoung cannot suppress her cringe. “But if I did, I’d major in rhymes. I’m already doing it, one step at a time...s.” Chaewon replies, her eyes closed with one hand on her ear like she has just hit a high note.

“Rhymes.” Sooyoung chuckles. “And how do you plan to support your family with that?”

“*Mom*,” Hyejoo hisses defensively, while Jiwoo glares at her wife.

“I’m not supporting anyone but *me* .” Chaewon snaps back. “But don’t worry Mrs. Ha. I have my entire future planned out. I don’t need a degree to be a billionaire like you.”

Sooyoung chuckles condescendingly again. “I don’t think it’s quite that simp-”

“After my first single drops, Nicki Minaj will attack me on social media. I’m better. She’s furious. I’m walking down Beverly Hills and I hear a voice. Her voice. I look down and she’s in the gutter. Trapped. She’s crying out, ‘Please Go Won, please help me. The *It* Clown is here and he’s gonna eat me.

“Pennywise?” Hyejoo says at her side.

“I tried out for that part, you know,” Jiwoo adds, wagging her finger. “They couldn’t handle my energy.”

“I don’t help her,” Chaewon continues. “The *It* Clown eats her. Good for me, because my record sales spike a thousand percent.”

“Jesus,” Sooyoung says behind the wheel, inspired by such tenacity from a child with the body mass of a chihuahua.

“Eventually I realize I will never be able to fill her shoes. I go in the gutter to slay the *It* Clown. He bites my head, but he can’t chew me up ‘cause I’m hard like that. I cut open his stomach singlehandedly and fish Nicki out. She was waiting for me all this time. Like Nemo in *Finding Nemo* . You seen that movie? I like the starfish. Anyway, we rap together in the sewer. She tries to kiss me. The Paparazzi followed me in. Her. Me. Getty Images. We collab following the rumors giving me INSTANT success. They have to create a new Grammy’s category for us. I’m rich.”

Sooyoung wrinkles her eyebrows together in astoundment, while Jiwoo immediately bursts into applause. Hyejoo nods at her side, looking at her in admiration.

Sooyoung sits in silence as the rest of the car waits anxiously for the CEO’s response. (Well, everyone but Chaewon, who has pulled out her phone to send her Snapchat streaks.)

“How about some radio girls?” Jiwoo offers. “Or Chaewon, do you want to drive the car?”

“NO,” Sooyoung and Hyejoo both say.

As the loud music starts through the speakers, Hyejoo gets a Snap message on her phone from Chaewon. She opens it to find a stick figure drawing of Sooyoung with angry eyebrows while Chaewon stands opposite of her with a crown.

Chaewon has also drawn Hyejoo standing next to her, their stick figures holding hands. The dark haired girl's little heart jumps.

Hyejoo giggles softly and Chaewon returns the laughter.

The girls are so busy entertaining each other for the rest of the ride that neither one of them hears Sooyoung speak to her wife.

"I like her."

Suddenly Jiwoo's phone begins to ring. Sooyoung looks down to see a number much too familiar to her liking.

"Is she calling *you* now? How did she even get your number?" Sooyoung asks quietly, doing her best to make sure Hyejoo cannot hear her.

"I don't know." Jiwoo whispers back, declining the call.

"I cannot believe she's trying to reach out to you." Sooyoung scoffs.

"I'll just block her number too. Please don't worry about it baby."

Though Jiwoo's comfort is reassuring, Sooyoung can't help but feel a sense of impending doom.

Sooyoung hears the beep of her locked car as she follows the rest of her family inside the Cheesecake Factory and up the stairs to the event floor.

The once ordinary restaurant had been transformed into a hybrid of a five star eatery and a hotel ballroom. Decorations of gold and whites sprinkled the room as parents and children chatted around working hibachi tables.

Flames jump on tables as the chefs cook performatively, entertaining the eyes and the stomachs of the attendees. A stage was placed at the front of the room, a single mic sitting on top of it while soft music was being played through the speakers.

Jinsol and Jungeun are seated at their table together, chatting and smiling, catching Choerry's eye.

She hadn't been so sure the both of them would be able to make it, knowing they both are usually still at work during this time of day (especially Jinsol). But just thinking that both of her mothers took the time out of their busy lives to watch her performance makes the child's entire face light up.

Hyejoo watches as Choerry runs over to hug them happily, catching the parents off guard. However, they embrace her almost immediately.

She notices familiar faces seated all around, like Sana and Momo from the Trivia Night pizza parlor, and Haseul, who is already chatting their ears off. Jiwoo catches Jungeun's eye and begins waving frantically. She receives a small wave back making Sooyoung and Jinsol also make eye contact, both locking eyes and glaring at each other immediately.

"Hello Jiwoo! So good to see you!" Irene breaks through the bustle of the crowd. "...Sooyoung."

“Irene! How are you?” Jiwoo smiles brightly at the PTA president in front of her.

“Oh, I’m fine.” Irene forces a smile onto her face, even though her stress is clearly visible behind it.

Haseul clangs a silver platter in her hands before dropping it to the floor on accident in the distance. “Sorry!”

“I’m just fine,” she says, staring off into space with dead eyes for a few seconds. The Has awkwardly watch Irene zone out with concern.

“Anyway, your seats are right over here.”

Irene gestures them to table a few seats away from the Kims’ (She was *sure* to space them apart. There was no way she wasn’t going to put assigned seating to good use.) Seated there already is Seulgi, who welcomes them with a smile.

Jiwoo notices the seating-dining arrangement and beams. “Hibachi tables honey! I love Hibachi tables!” Jiwoo cheers with a big smile, as Sooyoung smiles wordlessly at her side.

“I’m going to go say hi to Jungie I’ll be right back!” Jiwoo says, squeezing her wife’s shoulder before running off, excited and always acting like she hasn’t seen Jungeun in years.

“There is a separate table for the kids closer to the front of the stage. Since they’re participating,” Irene says gesturing to the right side of the room.

Yeri catches the girls’ eyes from her seat as their chef creates an onion volcano and she begins rapidly voguing while Choerry waves them over. Hyejoo and Chaewon laugh and walk over together.

The girls sit down, an empty space remaining for their missing friend.

“She’s still down there?” Hyejoo asks, looking at the other girls.

As if on cue, Yeojin sprints up the stairs, running around guests until she sees their table. She zig-zags through the crowd as she slips down into her chair, lowering herself so that she’s not visible.

Before the other girls can even ask what’s going on, a few out of breath chefs climb the top of the stairs looking left and right. Seeming to give up, they retreat back down the steps a few seconds later.

“Are they gone?” Yeojin asks from under the spot next to Choerry.

“Yes.” Choerry says and the smaller girl lifts her head back up.

“I got the recipe. I’m like a thief in the fucking night. Like The Terminator.” Yeojin says adjusting herself in the seat.

“I don’t think you’ve ever seen that movie.” Hyejoo comments.

“Whatever. I got what I came for.” Yeojin says smiling. The girl does a double take when she sees Hyejoo. “What the fuck are you wearing?”

Hyejoo squints. “At least I’m not wearing a Hawaiian shirt.”

“HEY.” Yeojin barks. “It’s tucked in. Because I’m classy.”

The girl's red Hawaiian shirt was indeed tucked into some black jeans.

"What, no bucket hat?" Chaewon asks mockingly.

"I was wearing one thank you very much... But my mom made me leave it in the car." She says dejectedly. "She said it messed up my hair. When I tried to snatch it back she sat on it. If you think I'm ever going to wear that now - think again."

"Your hair looks really pretty though!" Choerry compliments nicely.

Yeojin's class clown demeanor fades away immediately upon the compliment as she nervously gets to her seat, not sure why her cheeks are heating up from the attention. "Well... thanks."

"Hey guys!" A familiar, so oddly out of place voice half-yells, startling the kids.

Hyejoo smiles slightly seeing the teenager in front of them. "Hyunjin?"

"IS LIA WITH YOU?!" Yeri shrieks, making everyone in the room turn their heads towards her.

Hyunjin looks around slightly embarrassed and then turns back to Yeri. "No, sorry... I'm actually here as part of a teacher's help program thing for school. It looks really good when applying to colleges and stuff!"

Hyunjin would be lying if she said that was the only reason she had agreed to participate in this though. She can't deny that she was also doing it to avoid certain women in her life.

She continued her unofficial relationship with Lia, hooking up intermittently. However, the girl was also... talking to Heejin regularly again. It was just small conversations through text, neither of them daring to spend time together outside of school - Heejin not wanting to overstep, Hyunjin terrified of exploring her lingering feelings. But Hyunjin, truly, could *not* shake the feeling she got whenever her phone pinged and it made her want to throw up.

So when the opportunity had presented itself on Dalla High's bulletin board, she had taken it immediately, hoping to relieve the stress she was carrying around. Plus she had experience working with kids and had a lot of fun doing that anyway.

"What do you do?" Choerry questions.

"Basically, I'll be your principal's assistant for a while." Hyunjin answers.

"You have to assist my MOTHER? With what, her colostomy bag?" Yeojin jokes, while the other girls erupt into laughter.

"Yeah! Wait no... Just with school stuff. So you'll be seeing me around!" Hyunjin nods in confirmation.

"Have fun with that," Yeojin says with a face scrunched up like she just smelled garbage.

"I gotta go check to make sure everything's working for the performances, but I'll see you guys!" Hyunjin says, walking off towards the stage.

"How long do you think she'll last with Principal Haseul?" Chaewon asks the table.

"Hyunjin's crazy. She's going to stay the whole time." Hyejoo replies.

"Damn... You think she'll bring Lia around?" Yeri asks, getting eyerolls from everyone else.

“I hope so.” Yeri answers herself before the girls return to a regular conversation.

Jinsol Kim was finishing up in the Cheesecake Factory bathroom stall when two familiar voices burst into the room.

“No, the girl from Everglow Christian just *pretended* to want to fight me for a joint clout situation. It was the girl from Bishop Jeonghan that wanted to fight me for real because I said I didn’t understand how her ugly ass came out of her hot mom.”

Jinsol immediately recognizes the gritty voice to be that of Yeojin, Principal Haseul’s rowdy little daughter that not only broadcasted the animalistic “Milf Smackdown” on every social media platform imaginable, but also walked into their humble abode yelling “*WHAT’S UP, FUCKERS!*” last Christmas.

But, Choerry does like her enough to gush about her nearly every car ride they take *and* make her a friendship bracelet, so Jinsol figures maybe she can put those things aside.

“Speaking of hot moms, Mean Mrs. Ha kind of showed up everyone tonight... Dare I say, even Mrs. Kim?”

Nevermind.

“Which one? Mrs. Kim from Halloween?” Jinsol narrows her eyes. *That voice sounds like the thin, shaky one... What’s her name, Hyejoo’s girlfriend-*

“I’d never betray her by saying that.” Yeojin laments in a quieter tone, like she doesn’t want to admit that she is, in fact, betraying her by saying that. Jinsol stares at the bathroom floor speechless at this conversation. “But I wasn’t talking about her. I was talking about the other one. The fish doctor.”

“Choerry’s mom does surgery on fish?”

“No, you idiot! She just stares at them. That’s her *job*. What a fucking tank.”

Jinsol rubs her temples as she shakes her head in stress from the ignorance.

“Anyway,” Yeojin continues, “She did not show her all tonight, I mean that dress? I know she can do better than that.”

Jinsoul looks down at her presumably nice outfit in confusion as Chaewon’s hum of agreement echoes through the spacious bathroom. “She does have a nice donk though.” Yeojin continues.

The St. Jihyo’s parent buries her face in her hands, unable to believe she is sitting on a Cheesecake Factory toilet while being objectified by the two smallest 13 year-olds she’s ever seen.

One of them, presumably Chaewon, turns on the bathroom sink. “And she also dyed her hair! Thank god, shit was crackling like a bag of Lays classic,” Chaewon deadpans while Yeojin cackles by the sink.

“...Wow she is really hot though isn’t she?” Yeojin says, Jinsol crinkling her nose in disgust. “Maybe I let Mrs. Ha’s hot bitch energy cloud my ability to judge.”

“Yeah I think realistically there would be a tie between the-.”

Just then, Jinsol decides to collect herself and flush the toilet.

Yejin and Chaewon freeze in shock when they see who exits the stall.. The brunette PTA mother towers over the two squirrel-sized girls.

Jinsol walks right next to them to wash her hands at the adjacent sink.

“What were you saying about my *donk*? ” Jinsol questions, hands running under water.

“No- I wasn’t saying anything, I would never call it-” Yeojin stutters, her face as red as a tomato. Chaewon even begins to look at her questionably. (She had never seen Yeojin embarrassed for talking about women shamelessly. Even when she got caught.)

“You’re Choerry’s mom, I wouldn’t... I-I was just joking.” Yeojin explains.

“I wasn’t,” Chaewon says outright, and her frankness makes Jinsol look away from the sink to the blonde little girl in alarm.

“*OkaybyeDr.Kimsorry-*” Yeojin grabs Chaewon by the arm scrambles out of the bathroom to get back to the main event.

“And my dress is designer!” Jinsol shouts at them as the door slowly closes behind them, followed by a faint *Yes ma’am!* from Yeojin in the distance.

Just as Jinsol begins fixing herself in the mirror, she hears familiar obnoxious heels click through the doorway. Sooyoung Ha enters her peripheral vision.

“Ugh,” they both say involuntarily at the exact same time.

“These bathrooms are filthy,” the taller mother says, her Korean accent coming through. Jinsol hears Sooyoung gasp behind her. “There’s even a rat in here-”

“WHAT? A RAT?!” Jinsol panics and looks around.

“Right there! I see it look!” Sooyoung says, pointing to the mirror in front of Jinsol.

“WHERE? ON THE MIRROR?!”

“No in the mirror!” Sooyoung mocks, holding in a laugh. It takes a second for Jinsol to realize the only living thing visible in the mirror is her own self.

“Wait a second-”

“Aw, the rat is getting mad now,” Sooyoung says with a smug smile on her face.

Jinsol turns around to face her archnemesis square in the face. “I swear to *GOD* -”

“Now Jinsol, this is a Catholic event.”

“I could hit you.” Jinsol deadpans.

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Sooyoung rolls her eyes.

Meanwhile, in the main room, Jiwoo decides to use the bathroom as well. She quietly screeches her

chair back, and makes her way toward the restroom door.

“Why do you do that, Sooyoung? ” Jinsol interrogates, her voice echoing off the bathroom walls.

Sooyoung wavers for a split second. “What?”

“You love to act like you’re better than me. You hit me too, *remember that?*” Jinsol snaps.

“Because I am better than you.” Sooyoung retorts, a harsh chuckle coming out. “I think that’s pretty evident. I mean, today *alone*, I did more for this little event than you did.”

“So *what?* Is that the only reason you volunteer for these school events anyway? Just to prove you’re more successful than I am?” Jinsol retaliates.

Unbeknownst to both CEO’s, Jiwoo has since been standing outside the central bathroom door, overhearing their entire conversation. She quietly puts her ear up closer to listen for Sooyoung’s answer.

What her wife says next furthers the fissure through Jiwoo’s already damaged heart.

“Wow Jinsol, looks like you’ve *finally* caught on!” Sooyoung states. “Why else would I be here? It’s not like I have any other good reason.”

Jinsol just stares at the other parent, shellshocked. Not only did Sooyoung just admit to purposely bullying her, but she also just admitted to not having an ounce of care for being there for her daughter in the process.

Jinsol knows she shouldn’t, it’s out of line for her to say. But everything Sooyoung does is out of line, so why the hell not.

“Olivia deserves a better mother than you.”

Jiwoo’s eyes almost bulge out of their sockets.

Jinsol must have hit a very strong nerve, because Sooyoung is, for once, speechless. Before Sooyoung can even think of how to respond, a loud flush goes off in the corner stall.

The two women turn around to see the school principal slowly creeping out from behind the door.

“Haha don’t mind me...” The principal says, rushing to the sink. “Just... washing my hands...”

Haseul aggressively hits the soap dispenser hoping to get out of there as quickly as possible, rattling it like a maniac jerking a vending machine. The woman awkwardly washes up and then makes a beeline towards the door nearly slipping on the water dripping from her hands.

Jiwoo hears footsteps coming towards the door, snapping her out of her fog of sadness. She turns

away immediately, hastily returning to her seat.

Meanwhile, Haseul's awkwardness had left the two CEOs in an uncomfortable silence. Sooyoung looks at Jinsol with her jaw clenched. The doctor waits for the fashion mogul to say something, but is met with only silence.

Sooyoung walks out of the restroom, letting the door slam shut behind her on the way out.

"And then I will walk onto the stage and say," Principal Haseul looks off at some point off-camera as if there is another one. "Welcome, wonderful parents. We are doing this for the cure!"

"Cure for what?" Momo asks, very confused.

"I don't know but I am sure there's a cure!" Haseul explains.

Sana takes Momo's hand in comfort as the Kims look at each other with concern for the school's leader.

"MRS. WOOOOoonG." Yeojin's voice booms suddenly from across the restaurant, sending the principal's head swiveling towards the entrance.

Haseul nearly passes out when she sees Vivi arrive. She's wearing a very simple white sundress, yet the principal thinks she's never seen anyone more beautiful in her life.

From her seat, Yeojin observes their teacher as well. "Ms. Wong looks like the virgin Mary."

"How about you stop associating my mom with Biblical figures please and thank you," Chaewon replies.

Yeojin averts her eyes to observe her mother, still staring at the art teacher. She holds her tongue this time.

The principal watches, captivated, as Irene escorts Vivi to her seat next to Seulgi and the Has. Vivi settles down and begins to look around the room until she makes eye contact with Haseul. Both women's stomachs begin to fill with butterflies, but they suppress the feeling as they wave at each other. Vivi smiles and points down at her phone and after a second, Haseul pulls out her own.

Vivi: Hey :) Sorry I'm so late, I got caught up with some stuff.

Haseul: It's k! Glad 2 c u now :) Yeojin taught me word shortcuts. LOL.

Vivi giggles at her phone, biting her lip. Even the principal's way of texting was cute.

Panic and adrenaline rush through the art teacher when the thought crosses her mind. She immediately puts her phone away.

Meanwhile, Jinsol is sitting happily enjoying the Cheesecake Factory signature brown bread. Jungeun, next to her, feels her phone buzz in her lap.

"Oh honey, it's work I gotta take this," she whispers to Jinsol, who smiles with a little nod in

return. Jungeun plants a sweet kiss on her cheek before carefully standing up and exiting the room, taking her call with a distant “*This is Jungeun Kim,*”

Jinsol continues to enjoy the complimentary bread, waiting excitedly for the event to begin so she can watch her daughter perform.

Suddenly, her phone pings with a text.

UNKNOWN #: Shut up.

Jinsol looks at her screen, eyebrows knitted together in confusion and anxiety, mainly because she wasn’t even speaking.

Jinsol: ?!

Jinsol: I WASN’T EVEN SPEAKING???

Jinsol: WHO IS THIS

The CEO watches the typing bubbles appear on the other side of the screen.

UNKNOWN #: Jesus, you even text like an annoying person. You are so loud. Maybe if you stopped being loud and annoying people would like you.

UNKNOWN #: Sitting there eating your stupid fucking bread.

Jinsol looks around the room in hopes to find the culprit. Fortunately for her, the instigator (Sooyoung) is glaring straight at her, phone in hand.

Jinsol isn’t even surprised that their conversation in the bathroom had no impact on the woman’s attitude. (Or so she thought.)

On the opposite side of the room, Sooyoung scoffs, causing Jiwoo to look over at her.

“What are you doing.” Jiwoo asks, a sternness in her voice that Sooyoung might have thought differently of if she wasn’t staring at her with a hint of annoyance.

“Nothing.” Sooyoung replies flatly as her phone pings again. But as soon as the screen lights up, the screen goes black and the phone begins to reboot for no reason.

“What the-?” Sooyoung says opening her phone. She attempts to tap on her messages but her phone restarts again.

“HELP?!” Sooyoung starts saying, causing the rest of the parents and chefs at her Hibachi table to glance at her.

“What’s wrong?” Seulgi asks with concern.

“I’m being *hacked?!’* Sooyoung proclaims as her phone restarts yet again. “I keep getting texts and then it restarts. This must be a ruse.”

“Let me see.” Jiwoo says, yanking the phone from Sooyoung’s hands. Once the phone turns on again, it stays on and she opens the messages that read the same thing over and over again.

Dumb Woman Jinsol: effective.

Power

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Jiwoo looks up at Sooyoung. “Effective power?” Jiwoo asks.

“Oh that thing. Chaewon used to send me that all the time it drove me nuts.” Vivi comments.

“But why is Jinsol...” Jiwoo trails off, scrolling up in her wife’s messages.

Sooyoung suddenly becomes unnerved. “Um...”

Jiwoo’s jaw clenches as she reads the rude messages prior to Jinsol’s.

“Why would you send that?” Jiwoo snaps, lowering her voice so that only Sooyoung can hear.

Sooyoung purses her lips together and silences in a bit of embarrassment from being caught.

Jiwoo is still quiet, and when Sooyoung finally turns to look at her wife she is staring at her with a disgust she’s never quite been met with before.

“You are unbelievable,” Jiwoo says harshly, before she tears her gaze away in disappointment and shame. Sooyoung stops thinking about Jinsol for a moment, and is almost scared.

But with some clicks of her heels to the center of the stage, Irene takes everyone’s attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the annual Mother Mina’s Coalition of Catholic Schools’ Dinner & Spoken Word competition!”

Thirty minutes have passed since the competition had officially commenced, and Irene Kang thinks it is safe to say that this has been a garbage fire.

She definitely thinks St. Jihyo’s invite should have been more clear this year with what defines “Spoken Word”. What was supposed to be an opportunity for talented eighth graders to perform their own poems has turned out to be a blitz of troubled pre-teens just speaking words.

For example, a particularly interesting girl named Jennie Kim from Sister’s of Square One came to perform her piece “I’m that” by repeating the word “bitch” in various tones. This included but was not limited to: interrogative, declarative, exclamatory and even translated into Italian; Irene had nearly tackled her off the stage.

Following that there was a boy from Carat Christian in a ridiculous tie-dyed sweatshirt and red sunglasses who didn’t say any words at all, but just proceeded to peel an orange on stage in silence. The PTA president somehow found this worse than the previous performance considering he didn’t *speak any words* .

The failure to properly grasp the task was prevalent even in St. Jihyo’s own performances, as the students of their school began to perform in a clustered sequence.

Chaewon had given an interesting performance that wasn’t exactly mindblowing.

“F

L!

O

W...

E

R...

Flower.

Thank you."

Chaewon had strutted off the stage as the crowd remained completely silent, Vivi not even knowing what to say. Hyejoo however, had a single tear fall down her face listening to her crush's "beautiful" poem.

Sooyoung begins to think Chaewon's definition of "having a way with words" is knowing her way around one word.

Yejin was the most recent perpetrator, currently speaking the lyrics to 'Bidi Bidi Bom Bom' into the microphone while also doing her own version of Zapatillo. She was basically just stomping around the stage rapidly and had been now for five *long* minutes. (She claimed she wanted to expand her cultural knowledge.)

Unsurprisingly, her mother had been cheering her on endlessly from the start despite her ridiculousness.

What was surprising, at least to Jinsol, was that Choerry was cheering almost as loudly as Haseul.

"WOO! THAT'S MY BEST FRIEND!" The pink haired girl claps happily as Yeojin finishes, taking an exaggerated bow.

"Since when?" Jinsol whispers to her wife, who only shrugs with a smile on her face. Personally, Jungeun had enjoyed the little eighth grader's performance.

Haseul joins Yeojin on stage clapping and taking the mic. "I don't know how anyone is going to top THAT!" Haseul flashes a goofy smile out at the audience and Yeojin pulls her arm down to speak into the microphone.

"Follow me on instagram @ lil-"

Haseul quickly yanks her arm back up. "ALRIGHT! Thank you Yeojin!"

Yejin shuffles off the stage giving Choerry and Yeri a high five before taking her seat.

"Next up we have Yeri Kang!" Haseul exclaims.

"Pass!" Yeri says from her seat.

The crowd murmurs for a second and Irene looks like lasers are about to protrude out of her eyes and towards her child.

“Umm hahaha...” Haseul chuckles awkwardly before moving towards the edge of the stage, leaving the microphone on the stand to communicate with Yeri less publicly. “What do you mean pass?”

“My agent says I have to stop performing without pay.” Yeri states simply, Yeojin and Chaewon rolling their eyes.

“Who’s your agent?” Hyejoo asks.

“Me. I did extensive research on the matter.” Yeri explains.

“You *googled* it.” Yeojin interjects.

“Sorry Principal.” Yeri says, ignoring Yeojin and leaning back into her chair.

“Well, I don’t have a problem with it but your mom might get angry with me if I don’t force you to come up here.” Haseul says, looking up to see Irene continuing to shoot daggers her way.

“Just say I died!” Yeri suggests.

“Are you dumb?” Yeojin questions.

“Okay okay, I’ll think of something.” Haseul replies, quickly making her way back to the center of the stage. She grabs the microphone once again.

“So Yeri... has lost her voice!” Haseul says looking around the room for validation. Yeri gives her a thumbs up and Haseul smiles. “Yeah awww sad! But don’t worry because we have another performance already lined up! Everyone please give it up for Choerry Kim!”

Frazzled by the sudden announcement, Choerry looks up in surprise. She had thought she had a little more time to prepare. However, she nods at her friends and makes her way behind the stage and up the stairs.

Haseul moves behind the curtain and Choerry steps to the center, adjusting the microphone to her height comfortably.

“Hi everyone,” Choerry smiles to the audience, catching her parent’s wide smiles from across the room. “This is titled True Love.”

“YES ARIANA’S IMPACT” Yeri whoops. Haseul facepalms herself as she watches Yeri blow her cover almost immediately from backstage.

Choerry laughs nervously, as she shakes her arms out slightly before starting.

“True love is make believe,

or something we may never receive.

At least, that’s what people say.

But I would say they’re wrong, wrong in every way.

I see true love everywhere

In every part of my life.

It's a magical kind of love

Between a wife and a wife."

Sooyoung's eyebrows knit together. "How old is she again," she whispers to Jiwoo, but gets no answer as Jiwoo stares at Choerry like she's watching a newborn puppy roll over. Jinsol and Jungeun too, their eyes already shining and Jungeun looking like she is two seconds away from bursting into tears.

"Love exists,

I see it all the time.

From the trees,

to the bees,

to the love behind this rhyme."

"She is really saying this with her whole chest-" Hyejoo whispers judgmentally to the rest of the table.

"SHHH," the others respond aggressively.

"True Love is not fake. It's the realest of the real

I've seen it with my own two eyes. And it's the biggest deal."

"AYYYY!" Yeojin interrupts very loudly, disrupting the quiet audience while Jinsol glares at her.

I know I have a lot to learn, but at least I know this

True Love is a key to life and without it, I can't exist

So it's a good thing to me, true love being all around

I'll never get enough of it, because I have it by the pound."

Jinsol takes her wife's hand in her own as tears begin to form in her eyes, Jungeun already sobbing silently.

"Thank you." Choerry says, her hands clasping together as she finishes her time on stage.

Sooyoung squints, perplexed. "What the f-"

Roars of applause erupt. The Kim mothers are immediately up and cheering, the rest of the crowd clapping at the class president's heartwarming juvenile performance. Her table of friends are offering hoots and hollers of their own.

Choerry makes eye contact with Jinsol, who is holding her other weeping mother in her arms while still attempting to clap. Her eyes are sparkling with pride and Choerry feels a little embarrassed by their dramatic antics.

But she also feels very loved.

The girl waves at Jinsol who waves back before her daughter bounces away from the mic.

“That was pretty!”

The voice startles Choerry as she makes her way out from behind the stage. She sighs loudly knowing exactly who it belongs to as the crowd continues to cheer.

The class president looks up to see Nayeon looking at her with a smile.

She knows she shouldn't take Nayeon's words at face value, but she couldn't bring herself to be mean. “Thanks Nayeon.” She replies warily.

“I mean it!” Nayeon says, walking slightly closer to the other girl. “Look, I know we've had our problems or whatever...”

“You literally had our entire class traumatize me and my friends. Chaewon still uses a note to get out of P.E. because of you.” Choerry responds flatly. She tries to look for them for support, but are just out of the group's eyeline.

“Details!” Nayeon swats at the air. “I wanted to give a compliment and maybe catch up!”

Choerry looks back at the other girl and crosses her arms. “Why?”

“Come on Choerry, because I miss you! Wanted to see how you were doing... you know since Spring Fling is just around the corner.” Nayeon says.

Spring Fling. She and Nayeon had talked about the school's final year dance since seventh grade. Nayeon had called it the ticket to high school popularity.

“And?” Choerry asks.

“And... well you know the class votes on their king and queen...” Nayeon trails off. “You should tell everyone you don't want it. I mean obviously you would be an incredible queen but... You're already class president I mean is it really fair? That's actually kind of selfish of you Choerry.”

Of course that's what this was about. Nayeon didn't want to give Choerry a kind word. She wanted to manipulate her in order to get something she wanted. Again.

“You know what Nayeon?” Choerry says, a sudden burst of confidence radiating through her body. “No.”

Nayeon looks taken aback, as if she hadn't expected Choerry to reject her proposal. “Excuse me?”

“You have been awful to me and my friends for months. But now that you want something from me again you think you can somehow get me to do what you want?” Choerry says, slightly furious.

“I-” Nayeon starts.

“Well you can't. Don't talk to me anymore.” Choerry pushes passed her but spins around for one final thought. “You're a bad person Nayeon.”

With that, Choerry walks off, not being able to help but think that Yeojin would be proud of her for standing up for herself. She can finally see her friends again and makes her way towards them, a smile on her face.

But what she doesn't see is Nayeon's face fill with rage as the president finds her place once more.

At the sounds of the crowd's exuberant cheers for Jinsol's daughter, Sooyoung begins to feel her blood boil.

So much so, in fact, that she involuntarily gets up out of her seat to walk to Choerry Kim's Hibachi table in the front, where her daughter is waiting to perform.

Sooyoung didn't know whether it was the fact that her enemy's kid was being praised, the fact that Jiwoo was avoiding her, or her mother's attempt to contact her wife, but the amount of anger inside of her was unbearable.

"Hyejoo." Sooyoung calls at the group of St. Jihyo's eighth graders. Haseul's daughter, Irene's daughter, Choerry, and Hyejoo's not-girlfriend look up at Sooyoung approaching their table. Hyejoo looks like a wild tiger was just released in front of them.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

"Come here now," Sooyoung demands harshly, in front of all the other girls, and the air at their table is fraught with tension.

"What- I go on in six minutes?!" Hyejoo attempts to argue.

"*Hyejoo*," Sooyoung repeats in a terrifying tone, and her daughter immediately silences while her friends at her side look almost as scared. Hyejoo, not knowing what else to do, awkwardly peels herself away from her friends to prevent further embarrassment. They watch her go worriedly.

Hyejoo follows her mom to the private crevice backstage, shielded from everyone involved with the event. She looks up at her strikingly beautiful mother towering over her, and can't help but feel inadequate upon their dichotomy. What Sooyoung does next most certainly doesn't help.

"Read me what you are going to say," Sooyoung commands once more, and Hyejoo immediately glares at her in panicked discomfort.

"What?" Hyejoo asks, fearful. "No-"

"I know you have your little notebook on you. Read me what you plan on saying or you're not going up on that stage at all." Sooyoung threatens, and Hyejoo stammers. The child looks around them, as if looking for a way out. But at the end of the day, Hyejoo cannot move from Sooyoung's glowering gaze, and doesn't dare run away.

"I-It's embarrassing-"

"It's embarrassing but you plan on presenting it to hundreds of people?" Sooyoung counters aggressively. "And you can't even tell me?"

"It's- It's different," Hyejoo struggles to find the words. "I really don't want to do this with you-"

Sooyoung takes a long, exasperated sigh, slapping her thighs in the process dramatically as she kneels a bit to reach her daughter's eye level. "Listen to me," Sooyoung practically growls.

"Choerry Kim just ripped off 'What a Wonderful World' and delivered the most idiotic show-stealing performance I have ever seen in my life. Whatever you have prepared for today must be leagues better than that."

“What- Why?!”

“Don’t you want to *win*?”

“No?!!” Hyejoo retorts. “I didn’t come here to win!”

The very words seem to truly drive Sooyoung insane.

“Don’t *embarrass* me, Hyejoo,” her mother snaps.

Hyejoo feels a searing pain inside her chest and almost chokes up, but looks down at the floor. She pushes down the lump in her throat as hard as she can as she flips through the pocket sized notebook in her hands. Sooyoung waits in front of her with her arms crossed.

“Okay...” Hyejoo breathes, finding the page where she wrote the poem she has come to present. Her cheeks become a dusty pink at the sight of her words. She clears her throat, while her mother looks at her expectantly.

“ ‘*Honey*’ I hear

Through the cracks of my home

And when I hear your voice

I would like to call you ‘Honey’

When you fell into my lap from the stars

And leaned on my shoulder to sleep, rolling ribs

When we parade through rainy concrete

Or sit together on grimey floor

When I held you in my arms

When there is no need for words at all

I would like to call you-”

“Stop, stop stop!”

When Hyejoo looks up at her mother for the first time since she started, she is bright red and Sooyoung looks irate. “This is garbage,” Sooyoung declares flat out.

“No it’s not,” Hyejoo responds weakly, feeling tears well up in her eyes but is quickly overshadowed by Sooyoung’s tirade.

“ ‘*On grimey floor*’ ? This doesn’t even make any sense! I don’t even know what you’re saying!”

The person I wrote this for would know, the eighth grader thinks to herself.

“Choose something else.” Sooyoung demands, striking immediate panic in Hyejoo’s eyes.

“What? I’m about to go up?!” Hyejoo exclaims.

“*God*,” Sooyoung hisses. “Just *change* it Hyejoo.”

“To what?!!”

“To anything else! Something *good*!” Sooyoung huffs stressfully as the audience begins to clap for Jeongyeon, who has just concluded her poem about overthrowing the government.

Hyejoo flips through her notebook in a panic, not knowing what else to choose.

“And up next we have Hyejoo Ha!” Haseul calls out from onstage. The crowd claps in response.

“Don’t you dare perform that mess you just read to me,” are Sooyoung’s last words, as she virtually pushes Hyejoo up the stage steps.

“Hyejoo, where are you!” Haseul calls out again, and Hyejoo feels her heart beating out of her chest, completely overwhelmed.

When the eighth grader finally makes her way out from behind the curtain, she dauntingly looks on at the 150 pairs of eyes staring up at her. She finds herself at a loss for words.

In front of the microphone, she fails to make a sound.

“Hyejoo Ha!” Haseul repeats, as if to give her a second chance at starting.

Hyejoo watches as Sooyoung makes her way through the clusters of Hibachi tables, back to her seat with Jiwoo, and sits down to join her. Jiwoo isn’t even looking at Hyejoo, and has her eyes on Sooyoung, confused and seemingly a little upset.

“O-One second,” Hyejoo says timidly, barely audible into the mic, while the audience nods understandingly.

“Go Oli!” Chaewon cheers, breaking the silence, and her friends seated around her follow suit.

“YEAH!”

“WOO!”

“GO OLIVIA!”

The audience throws in some supporting cheers for her as well, as she flips through the notebook frantically for something to say. Out of fear for her mother’s reaction, she officially elects not to read her love poem. *It probably was stupid, after all.*

There are a lot of things she’s written in here, Hyejoo notes. Many poems, most terribly dismal. She had chosen that particular one for Chaewon since that was one of the only ones that didn’t involve such depressing imagery.

But her mother had demanded something different, didn’t she? She wanted a showstopper.

Hyejoo is too scared to think of what would happen for her if she didn’t comply.

After a flurry of pages in the small notebook, she begins to recognize one, very dark collective.

Scattered, dime-sized circles of dried tears riddle the pages, some of the ink smeared. She feels a lump in her throat.

The eighth grader wouldn't call it poetry. Just, thoughts.

In that moment on stage, amidst the anticipatory silence of the audience and the faint clinking of silverware and china, Hyejoo decides. Without even remembering the entirety of what she had written down -

"Dear Mom," Hyejoo reads into the mic, the words from the page echoing throughout the crowded ballroom.

The two words shoot out into the audience like harpoons, spearing directly into Jiwoo and Sooyoung and transfixing them in rigor mortis, sitting frozen with no choice other than to be held captive by the words of their daughter.

"What do you think of

When you hear the word

'Mom'?"

Hyejoo is too nervous to look up from her notebook at her mothers in the audience, who are completely focused on her.

Dear Mom? Sooyoung thinks, frozen.

And beside her, Jiwoo -

Which one?

Like dominos, nosy heads turn to face the celebrity couple to watch their reactions in real time.

"Do you think of warm open arms, waiting for you," Hyejoo continues on, her voice barely audible - so much so that whoever sits behind the sound system turns up the volume.

"When the sun rises, when the sky falls?"

Do you sleep well knowing

That if no one understands your language

There is always someone who can read?

I wish you gave this peace unto me because

Dear Mom, I can only dream."

Jiwoo feels her spirit plummet the ten thousand stories it usually sits atop of.

“Dear Mom, I taste what you mean for me

From mothers that aren’t mine

My skin whining to stay and hide

When I have to go home to what I wish wasn’t mine,

Dear Mom,” Hyejoo’s tone speeding up, feeling as though she is making a terrible mistake but cannot possibly undo what she has already begun-

“ I never asked to be born and I never wanted to be.”

The line gets scattered, short gasps from the audience, and when Hyejoo looks up she catches one minute glimpse of unadulterated rage in Sooyoung’s eyes. The eighth grader begins to tremble.

“Dear Mom,

Do you know how hard it is?

To get up every morning knowing you’ll never be enough today?

Maybe I won’t,” Hyejoo says, and Jiwoo, Chaewon, Choerry, Sooyoung, *everyone’s* heart stops.

“But how disappointed would you be then?” Hyejoo reads, struggling to suppress her shaking.

“Dear Mom,

I don’t know when the day was

When you made the choice to hate me

But tell me what I did, because whatever it was, I’m sorry,” Hyejoo’s voice cracks, and Choerry nearly stands up from her seat but Yeojin stops her.

Jungeun looks first to her wife, who is just as speechless as she is, and then to Jiwoo, square in the middle of the room, who watches in horror with tears bubbling in her eyes.

“Dear Mom,

Every morning I feel invisible hands pressing down on my chest

And I wish you would finally hold me

I wish you would just make them go away,

Dear Mom,” Hyejoo finally pauses, lip quivering as she finally notices that even the silverware

noises have stopped, leaving nothing but the pounding of blood in her ears.

“When I think of the word, ‘Mom’” the thirteen-year-old reads slowly, deliberately.

“The worst part is that I don’t think of you at all

I picture a different woman,

one I’ve never had.”

After a few seconds of silence, the crowd bursts into applause. Thunderous, sick, voyeuristic applause for the celebrity family, overpowering the Cheesecake Factory banquet hall, even louder than the applause Choerry elicited.

Her friends stay still. Her parents, still.

Hyejoo flees the stage.

Chaewon runs out of her seat before Choerry can. The little girl runs all throughout the restaurant, from the bathroom she went earlier to the nooks and crannies of unused patio seating to the valet parking lot.

Chaewon looks for Hyejoo for thirty minutes straight, and never finds her.

“We had a lot of top contenders today, everyone,” Haseul chirps nervously from the stage, still doing her best but still unable to truly salvage the good-humored ambiance of the children’s event from the fallout of Hyejoo Ha’s spoken word.

In the entire time span from her performance to now, Jiwoo has not spoken a word. Sooyoung had left immediately to go find their daughter (or, perhaps, to avoid Jiwoo’s reaction altogether).

The principal has one small trophy and a golden envelope in her hands. “Our winner for tonight was chosen via an applause meter... Can I get a drumroll please?”

When Haseul rips open the envelope and **Hyejoo Ha** is announced with faux enthusiasm, Jiwoo barely hears it, as she feels as though she’s underwater.

“Hyejoo, please come up to the stage?” Haseul calls repeatedly, and the audience surveys the room for the girl.

“It appears as though Hyejoo is not here...” Haseul says. “Can we have a parent please come up and accept the award?” The principal looks to Jiwoo, the only one at the table.

Jiwoo blinks, hard. Haseul is staring straight at her, and so is the rest of the room. It takes every last bit of her to force a polite smile and decline with a shake of her head.

Haseul awkwardly leaves the trophy on the foot stage.

“THANK YOU FOR COMING!”

When every family is getting up from their Hibachi table, the ruckus is loud.

Hyejoo, from the most secluded crevice of the room, watches painfully as Yeojin, Yeri, Chaewon, and Choerry disperse, but not to look for her.

Principal Haseul is looking upon Yeojin with a great big smile of pride. Choerry’s mothers have love practically radiating from their bodies. Hyejoo remembers the looks in her own mothers’ eyes as she spoke about them onstage today, and feels sick to her stomach at the thought of facing them.

Instead, the eighth grade girl begins to walk - to nowhere in particular. Hyejoo is circling aimlessly through the crowd again and again, exhausting paths as she pretends she is on her way to something welcoming like her friends.

As she continues to avoid her mothers, the uncomfortable eighth grader bumps into a familiar adult body.

Jinsol Kim turns around, and looks down at Hyejoo like the child is an abandoned puppy in the street. She can’t tell if she hates it, or is simply relieved someone has truly, finally seen the state she is in.

“Olivia!” she greets, while Jungeun off to the side and squatting a bit to fix Choerry’s pink hair, both of them unable to hear them from the noise. “Congratulations!”

“Hi,” Hyejoo barely chokes out. She doesn’t know what else to say and should just keep walking, but Jinsol’s concerned eyes have somehow fastened her feet to the floor.

“Olivia,” Jinsol repeats gently. “Are you okay?”

It stings Hyejoo’s heart, as well as Jinsol’s for already knowing the answer to her own question. The child stammers in response.

A venomous voice interrupts them. “What the *hell* do you think you’re doing, Jinsol!”

Jinsol and Hyejoo look to see Sooyoung glowering at the both of them, especially the other CEO.

“I’m just asking if she’s alright?!” Jinsol explains rather calmly for her agitation, noting Hyejoo’s uneasiness and not willing to exacerbate it further.

“Get the hell away from my daughter.” Sooyoung spits, not minding at all the vulgar profanity in front of her child, and takes Hyejoo by the arm dragging her in Jiwoo’s direction.

Sooyoung walks away, heels loudly beating into the carpeted floor beneath her, while Hyejoo takes a look behind her to meet Jinsol’s concerned eyes once more. In seconds, she can no longer see her, now covered by the crowd.

Unread Messages from TIDDIE JUGGLERS (6)

Unread Messages from Choerry (13)

Unread Messages from Yeri (5)

Unread Messages from Yeojin (8)

Unread Messages from chae (21)

There is nothing to be heard in the Mercedes but the low, tight hum of the engine.

Jiwoo looks out of the shotgun window quietly, her eyes perpetually glued there. Hyejoo can see from her seat that Sooyoung continues to drive tensely, her jaw locked.

When the competition had ended, and the participants went back to join their families, Hyejoo was not greeted with any congratulations as she walked towards her mothers with the trophy in her hands (Sooyoung made sure she got it). In fact, they were already gathering their things to leave both with stone cold demeanors.

There was undoubtedly something wrong, *especially* since Jiwoo looked on the verge of tears yet paralyzed in other, unspoken emotions.

“Are you mad at me?” Hyejoo asks ever so softly, hating the uncharacteristic silence between her two mothers. What the eighth grader doesn’t know is that Jiwoo isn’t mad at her, not at all. But before Jiwoo can answer-

“I don’t want to hear anything out of you right now,” Sooyoung harshly snaps at their daughter.

“*Sooyoung!*” Jiwoo snaps at her wife, and the desperation in her voice rips through the atmosphere like a flash of lightning.

The CEO’s eyes widen slightly at Jiwoo’s tone, not knowing how to respond to the unfamiliar situation. So she doesn’t.

Hyejoo, in the back seat, is nearly making holes in the inside of her hoodie’s pocket to ground herself, shaking in fear. She realizes she is holding her breath.

Jiwoo quickly glances back at her daughter, then closes her eyes with a shaky sigh of regret - completely unsure of how to handle this car ride, and much less this entire situation.

“We’re not mad at you sweetie,” she says, returning to her usual tone of gentleness for her daughter’s sake.

Hyejoo’s eyes drill into the back of her mother’s heads, back and forth, while Sooyoung is terrifyingly silent. Jiwoo turns to face out of the passenger window, and brings her hand up to her face while Hyejoo catches her first glimpse of her mother’s tears.

At the sight, she instantly regrets it all - reading the poem in the first place, asking her mothers to come watch her, telling Principal Haseul she wanted to participate, and everything in between.

Jiwoo and Sooyoung say no other words to each other for the remainder of the car ride, nor do they look at each other. Hyejoo tries her hardest to keep herself composed in the back to preserve the silence, not wanting to make it worse by speaking again.

It is dusk when the Ha family arrives at their estate. Their bodyguard Eunseo waits dutifully at the door, holding their orange labradoodle puppy in her arms.

Jiwoo approaches first, and she does not wait for Eunseo to speak. "Please make sure my bags are all in the car," Jiwoo says coldly, causing Eunseo to double-take to make sure it was, in fact, the Jiwoo she knows. But she exits their enormous threshold obediently, handing off Dog to the couple's daughter.

Hyejoo, entrenched in nothing other than the feeling of impending doom, immediately flees to the grand foyer with the pup. She runs up the enormous marble staircase down the corridor, as if to protect herself from the imminent explosion she can just feel approaching. She in no way wants to be a part of it; she already curses herself for providing the fuel.

Sooyoung enters the mansion last. Pulling off her YSL shades, her piercing eyes are trained to Jiwoo's back, as her wife walks away from her, silent and unreadable. Sooyoung hates the unease, the vacuum of their home.

She flips on a light switch by the home's entrance, but Jiwoo continues to walk in the dark toward their kitchen. Sooyoung follows.

"What time is your flight," the CEO calls out to her wife in her silvery voice, deliberately ignoring the elephant in the room.

Jiwoo doesn't answer. Instead, Sooyoung watches as her wife enters one of the walk-in pantries. Jiwoo clatters some appliances around. She comes back out with a mixer.

What? Sooyoung asks, bewildered. Jiwoo, tight-lipped, re-enters the pantry and comes out with a large tupperware of flour. "Are you... baking?"

Her wife ignores her once more, and comes out again with sugar, a spice rack, and various other supplies. The act of defiance irritates Sooyoung further.

"Is this about Hyejoo's performance?" she asks annoyedly, as if the whole ordeal were a nuisance.

Jiwoo continues to ignore her as she sorts ingredients onto the kitchen island, the white light spilling from their threshold barely reaching her. Without her sweet disposition, she is nothing more than a quiet silhouette.

"You're *baking*? You're going to miss your flight because you're upset at what she said?" Sooyoung presses again, and again receives no answer. "Come on, Jiwoo. Don't let it affect your schedule."

Right then and there, Jiwoo slams the metal measuring cup harshly on the countertop. The strident clang reverberates throughout the space, sending chills straight up Sooyoung's spine.

"My schedule, Sooyoung?" Jiwoo whispers. "Did I just hear you right? I shouldn't let our *daughter* affect my *schedule*?"

Sooyoung looks like a deer in headlights, fearful of her wife's never before seen anger bubbling up to the surface. But in a quick moment, she recollects herself for a response. "Well..." she nods calmly, "It's your professional life. You shouldn't disappoint them."

"Thank you Sooyoung, but I think I'd rather disappoint a bunch of strangers I've never met than

disappoint my own daughter.” Jiwoo responds sharply.

Her eyes in the darkness of their kitchen sear through Sooyoung’s soul.

“I guess I shouldn’t expect you to understand that.”

Sooyoung, like clockwork, is defensive. “And what is that supposed to mean, Jiwoo?” she asks sharply.

Jiwoo smiles in utter disbelief. “You don’t *get* it, do you?” Jiwoo is now rounding the counter to confront her wife. “Our daughter,” she starts. “Is so unhappy in our own home.”

When Jiwoo is finally out of the darkness, Sooyoung’s breath catches in her throat at the sight of tears glistening in her wife’s eyes, refusing to fall. “So *unhappy*, ” she stresses painfully, “that she wishes she was *never born*.”

“And you want to talk to me... About *disappointing* people?” her voice breaking. “When are you going to get off of your *fucking* high horse Sooyoung, and see that *we* have disappointed *her*? She has to go up on that stage in front of everyone and cry for help because she can’t talk to us!”

“Oh don’t coddle her, Jiwoo.” Sooyoung replies apathetically. “She has never been so ungrateful and disrespectful. She has everything she could ever want or need, and yet she has the audacity to go up there and *humiliate* us, Jiwoo? In front of *the world*? She was being nothing but a spoiled brat.”

Jiwoo shakes her head, and can only pause in incredulity. “How *dare* you antagonize Hyejoo?” she asks quietly.

“Jiwoo-”

“...The best, most valuable thing we have ever made together?” Jiwoo says with tears flowing down her cheeks.

Sooyoung looks at her like nothing even sank in, and it makes Jiwoo furious.

“And what am I supposed to do.” Sooyoung snaps harshly. “Let her go up there? Make you and I seem like *abusive mothers*?”

“Has it ever once occurred to you that maybe we *are* bad mothers, Sooyoung?” Jiwoo retorts.

“Oh dear GOD Jiwoo!” Sooyoung turns around, throwing her hands up in frustration. “Do not EVEN *start* with me on this!”

“We don’t listen to her,” Jiwoo continues, while Sooyoung walks away. “We leave her here all by herself. She acts out at school. She *runs* away from home for Christ’s sake?! And you *bully* her. Don’t even pretend like you didn’t give her reason to hate you.

The CEO whips around and faces Jiwoo again with an overwhelming amount of rage in her eyes. “Oh, it’s all my fault, Jiwoo? You think so? You wanted me to join,” Sooyoung says through grit teeth. “This pointless, *stupid* little PTA. And I *complied*. For *you*.”

“*No you didn’t!*” Jiwoo exclaims loudly, with tears running down her face, and laughs shallowly at the lie told with such confidence. “You didn’t join the PTA for *me*, or for her, or for anyone but yourself! So you could parade your ego around like you’re better than everyone else! Isn’t that what you said earlier? In the bathroom? Or did I hear you wrong?!”

The blood drains from Sooyoung's face so quickly it's visible.

"How did you hear that." It's more of a command than a question.

"It makes me wonder what I haven't heard." Jiwoo snaps, wiping the tears from her face angrily. Then, she walks back to the other side of the kitchen island.

"I *love* you Sooyoung." She says painfully, with her turned before she meets her wife's eyes again. "But you haven't done *one* good thing for this family."

The scathing accusation is enough to push Sooyoung over the edge at full force.

"I haven't done one good thing for this family? What do *you* do for this family, Jiwoo?!" Sooyoung shouts, suddenly in hysterics. "For more than *half of my life*," she starts, her face contorted in a nasty expression. "I have built myself from nothing," she growls angrily. "I came from *dirt* poor, barely had anything to eat or to wear, lost *everything* I have *ever* cared about, and fought my way to the top of this world with nothing but sheer *hatred* so that MY CHILDREN would NEVER have to go through what I went through!" Sooyoung explodes at poor Jiwoo angrily, her voice getting louder with every sentence. "What do *YOU* do for this family, Jiwoo? Why don't you ask yourself that? All you do is sit around, laughing like an idiot without a thought in the world, and going on TV and making these stupid little YouTube videos! You think you could do that without my money?! I know you're dumb but you can't *possibly* be that *stupid*!"

It takes a moment for Sooyoung to register just how much hurt is on Jiwoo's face.

Tears well up in Jiwoo's kind eyes, and Sooyoung instantly, instantly knows that she's made her worst mistake of all.

"Jiwoo," Sooyoung whispers, and every bit of fear she has experienced in her life is nothing compared to this moment.

"So what am I to you, then," Jiwoo says in a thick, broken whisper. "...Your dumb, useless trophy wife that you keep around for sex?"

"No," Sooyoung immediately retracts, feeling her heart painfully contract in her chest. "I-I love you, I love you *so much* Jiwoo- I didn't mean that-"

"You did," Jiwoo whispers softly, finding it hard to breathe. "That's how you've seen me all along," the loving woman's voice is gone, her words nothing but a whisper. "Always inferior to you."

"Jiwoo-"

"You know Sooyoung, when we decided to start this family, I- I never once... For a second," Jiwoo chokes back a sob while speaking, and Sooyoung bites the inside of her lip so hard she tastes blood. "Thought you could make our little girl so *miserable*."

“And I guess for so long,” Jiwoo looks out the kitchen’s massive windows out into their orchard, smiling hollowly and letting the tears stream from her face. “I’ve just been pushing away the reality,” she sobs, “That you have become a *horrible* person, Sooyoung!”

Sooyoung blinks back the tears in her own eyes, her jaw locked in place as she feels herself begin to break her signature demeanor. “I am *not* a horrible person.” The billionaire’s voice shakes.

“YOU ARE!” Jiwoo cries, looking at her soulmate who she barely even recognizes anymore. “Hyejoo does deserve better than you.” Jiwoo says with a bitter smile, remembering Jinsol’s words in the bathroom, thinking of where exactly they both started yet how starkly different they have become. “Maybe I should have been defending Jinsol all along.”

“*JIWOO ENOUGH!*” Sooyoung barks at her wife, and Jiwoo recoils backward from her in fear.

But Jiwoo walks back, right up to her face, the angriest Sooyoung has ever seen her in her life. “Don’t you *dare* scream at me, Sooyoung,” she orders, her voice trembling. “We have a *child*,” she whispers. “Right upstairs.”

Sooyoung looks at Jiwoo, the only person who has ever been on her team, now crying in horror in front of her at the person she’s become. She tears her eyes away, but her wife’s face is burned into her memory.

“Jiwoo, I’m sorry,” she says softly, stepping closer to her. “I’m so sorry for-, I-”

“I’m done,” Jiwoo says lifelessly. “I’m done, Sooyoung,” Jiwoo says, walking away from the kitchen back towards the threshold of their mansion.

“*What?*” Sooyoung instantly feels overcome with terror. “*What does that mean?!*”

“It means exactly what I said it means.” Jiwoo snaps, wiping the tears from her face. “I’m done.”

“*Jiwoo!*” she calls pleadingly.

Sooyoung immediately tries to chase after her wife, making an effort to take her by the arm only to have Jiwoo rip it away.

“GET AWAY FROM ME!” Jiwoo screams deafeningly, taking one last look at Sooyoung’s perfect, heartbroken face before nearly tripping over herself to run out of their envied home.

Jiwoo runs out into the cobblestones, the spraying of the giant fountain drowning out Sooyoung’s pained cries behind her. With her belongings for the trip already pre-packed into the black Range Rover, she climbs herself into the car without once looking back. She hears Sooyoung getting closer, and slams the soundproof door.

The complete silence is jarring.

Jiwoo sobs quietly into her hands, and her driver up front stays silent amidst the heart-wrenching sounds. The car begins to move, leaving her home behind. Jiwoo doesn’t look back, not even once.

The phone rings in Jiwoo’s ear, and tears make vision impossible.

Jungeun Kim picks up on the second ring. “*Jiwoo?*”

For a few seconds, Jiwoo can’t bring herself to speak at all. When she does, her voice is nothing but a wet, shaking whisper. “Jungeun?”

“Jiwoo?!” Jungeun takes on another tone, her signature one of extreme alarm. *“Are you okay?”* Jiwoo is crying so hard into her hand, barely hearing Jungeun worriedly asking her what’s wrong.

“Something happened Jungie,” is all Jiwoo can breathe out, and the sound is heartbreaking.

“Are you safe? Oh my God, where are you? Where is Sooyoung?”

“It’s-” Jiwoo falls apart quietly into tears again. “I-It’s because of Sooyoung,” she whispers.

“Jungie,” Jiwoo calls softly, “Can I stay with you tonight?”

Back at the Ha estate, Sooyoung feels her entire world dismantle, and sobs loudly and violently into her hands. She doesn’t even notice the footsteps behind her; a soft, scared voice breaking through the silence.

“Did Mom leave?”

When Jiwoo steps out of the car and onto the familiar white driveway, Jungeun runs over to take her sobbing best friend into her arms.

Together the two of them sit in the Kim household. It’s just around 11PM, and the house by the sea is mostly quiet - Choerry playing on her Nintendo Switch upstairs, Jungeun and Jiwoo seated at the dining table.

Jinsol comes around and gently sets a hot mug of tea in front of Jiwoo, who thanks her sincerely.

“Baby, can you make sure Choerry doesn’t come down here?” Jungeun asks her wife softly, remembering Choerry is friends with Hyejoo. For Jiwoo’s sake mostly, she doesn’t want either daughter to get tangled in this.

“Of course, we’re doing Tarantula Island,” the other brunette responds with a little smile.

Jungeun doesn’t know what that means, but she hopes it’s time-consuming. Probably something in that Animal Crossing game Choerry is spending all her time on.

“Jiwoo, you can stay here for as long as you want,” Jinsol adds sincerely. The pair had already known the Has were in for a very bad night based on Hyejoo’s disturbing performance, and Jinsol especially was worried for bright, loving Jiwoo. “What’s ours is yours.”

Jiwoo smiles up at her best friend’s wife through dimmed eyes. “Thank you so much, Jinsol,” she whispers.

When Jinsol leaves the two of them at the dining table to resume her quality time with Choerry, there is only silence as Jiwoo takes a shaky breath inward.

Jungeun takes Jiwoo’s hands in hers.

“She shouted at me,” Jiwoo says, looking down into her murky black tea.

Jungeun waits for more, but Jiwoo simply looks like someone killed her from the inside. “...Has

that ever happened before?" she asks gently.

"...No. Never."

A moment of silence passes over them as Jungeun watches her lifeless best friend stare into her drink with tears bubbling her eyes. "Jiwoo, we don't have to talk about it tonight okay?" she says gently, rubbing a thumb over her best friend's hand. "The guest room is all ready for you, you should get some sleep."

"She called me dumb," Jiwoo states emptily.

"*WHAT?!*" Jungeun screeches.

A door is heard open from upstairs. "DID YOU CALL ME?" Choerry shouts from the top of the stairs, out of sight.

"No sweetie!" Jungeun shouts up, her angry eyes still locked on Jiwoo's. "It was a work thing, carry on!"

Jiwoo feels the lump in her throat once more - it feels like the twist of a knife that she needs to tell Jungeun, because now it feels *real* and not a part of some horrible night terror.

The door closes upstairs.

"What do you mean Sooyoung called you dumb." Jungeun asks protectively.

"I started baking." Jiwoo starts, trying her best not to sob.

"...When you got home?"

"I felt like I was going crazy Jungie," Jiwoo explains through tears. "I thought that maybe if I made something I would calm down enough to get on our plane..."

"So then what happened?" Jungeun asks.

"We just- We started fighting," Jiwoo cries. "I was so mad. I've never been that angry before. I called her a horrible person..."

Jungeun sits back a bit, shocked. She had seen Jiwoo upset before but never enough for her to be mean. Jiwoo definitely had the right to be, but... still.

"I wanted to stop but I felt... I still feel... so *upset* with her, for Hyejoo, I just- *I*- I'm *sick* of her hurting our child Jungeun." Jiwoo sobs looking straight at Jungeun. "And I feel like it's all my fault-"

Jungeun's eyes nearly fall out of her head. "Absolutely not-"

"No, no listen," Jiwoo whispers softly, barely audible. "I'm the one who... had the stupid idea for her to join the PTA," she says. Jungeun feels her heart twist in pain at the sight of this avenue going horribly wrong for one of them, especially thinking on how wonderfully it went for her.

"We were... afloat before with Hyejoo thinking her other mother was too busy for her. But now she has the time for her, Hyejoo just sees now that she doesn't care," Jiwoo says, voice infused with sobs. "Right in front of our daughter, she treats her like... complete shit, and I never said anything, I never stood up for her. Imagining how she must've felt going through that alone-"

Jiwoo has to cover her mouth to avoid sobbing loudly and Jungeun just watches, feeling tears prickle her eyes at the sight of the happiest person she's ever known in so much pain. "I don't know who Hyejoo was talking about in that poem, I have no idea- But I-" Jiwoo struggles to speak through her tears. "I try my *best* for her Jungeun,"

"I know, I know you do-"

"Sooyoung was so angry- I just- I feel like," Jiwoo gestures to herself in pain. "I wanted to be able to do enough for the both of us. I thought I was, but I wasn't even close. And now- I-"

"Jiwoo," Jungeun starts, choosing her words carefully as she rubs her best friend's shoulder slowly. "You tend to keep everything inside."

"What do you mean," Jiwoo whines wetly into her hands. "You're the one who's always telling me to quiet down in restaurants-"

"No, no not your voice. I mean when you're angry," Jungeun clarifies, looking at her best friend in concern. "You want to be happy for everyone. You feel like it's your only job, and that you can never ever break character. I *know* you."

Jiwoo just shakes her head. "I've tried to talk to her. I told her how Hyejoo must have felt when she was being mean to her."

"Yes, but that's how Hyejoo feels. You need to speak up on how you feel too," Jungeun responds. "But even then, this is still not your fault."

Jiwoo thinks for a moment, knowing Jungeun is right. "I don't like making anyone upset."

"Sooyoung had no problem making Hyejoo upset. Or you," Jungeun refutes bluntly.

Jiwoo smiles a little. "Why didn't you become a lawyer instead?"

A little laugh is shared between them, before the air falls silent once again. Jungeun waits for Jiwoo to speak.

"...I know... that Sooyoung has very, very deep problems. Parts of her past that she will never get over. But I thought... Was it so stupid for me to think she would work on it at some point for the sake of her own family?"

"Not at all," Jungeun says, her heart stinging at Jiwoo's soft cries.

Jungeun is still trying her hardest to wrap her head around the fact that Sooyoung took advantage of the person who, in her entire life, has loved her the most.

"After seeing her treat Hyejoo so terribly for what? Her ego? Acting like all a child needs for love is food and- and- *shelter*, like some sort of *animal*. Oh my God," Jiwoo gasps.

"What?"

"Oh my God, I- I left Hyejoo with her," Jiwoo breathes, terrified. "Oh my God-"

"Jiwoo, breathe please," Jungeun reassures. "Do you want to go get her? I will go get her right now, I don't mind." Jungeun says. And beat Sooyoung to a pulp in the process.

Jiwoo takes a minute to breathe, thinking it over. After a few minutes of calming herself down and running through thousands of scenarios in her head, she sighs.

“No. If you went and got her there would be a scene. Hyejoo has gone through enough.” Jiwoo says more solemnly than Jungeun has ever heard her speak in her life.

“She thinks I’ve left for my work trip anyway. Sooyoung has too much pride to tell her about the fight I think.” Jiwoo sniffles. “Plus I will have to go to my set eventually, and I can’t leave Hyejoo to you. That’s asking too much.”

“We would do it though.” Jungeun reassures her. “How about this. You can call Hyejoo tomorrow and explain what happened. Then you can see what she wants to do. If she wants to get away from Sooyoung. I will go get her even if you’re away.”

“Okay.” Jiwoo rubs her hands over her own face. “I-I have to reschedule my flight then.”

“I’ll go get your laptop.” Jungeun says, squeezing her hand. “How about a cupcake too? Jinsol and Choerry made some the other day and they’re actually pretty good.”

Jiwoo just nods weakly, her head in her hands.

“Coming right up.” Jungeun says quietly making her way to the kitchen in order to find anything to fill Jiwoo’s empty heart. Even if she knows she could never give her what she needs the most.

It’s the absolute middle of the night when Jinsol wakes up to the sound of soft crying, and the soft creak of her master bedroom door opening and closing.

“Choerry?” the brunette asks sleepily, her wife still snoozing peacefully at her side. It’s been a year or so since the most recent incident, but Choerry had the tendency to crawl into their bed cuddling them whenever she had a nightmare.

The whimpering gets closer, but it sounds a little... Different?

Suddenly an adult-sized body is weaseling in between the wives in the darkness.

“*Jiwoo?!* ” a shocked Jinsol asks, while Jiwoo invites herself under their covers sniffing with bountiful tears on her face. The celebrity wakes her best friend Jungeun in the process.

“Jiwoo? What-”

Jiwoo is sobbing loudly as she snuggles into Jungeun’s arms, and Jungeun hesitantly wraps her arms around her. “I-I m-miss her,” Jiwoo chokes out through her painful sobs.

Jungeun, half-awake, rubs her back consolingly while her and her wife look at each other worriedly. Jiwoo’s been away from Sooyoung for a mere few hours and she’s already horribly touch-starved.

Jinsol is frozen in social confusion. *What do I do*, she mouths to Jungeun in the darkness.

Hug her! Jungeun mouths back urgently.

Jinsol awkwardly moves her arm near Jiwoo. She isn’t really sure if it’s her place to hold her..? (Then again, Sooyoung had sex with her wife.)

Jungeun, seeing Jinsol’s hesitance, coos softly in her best friend’s ear. “Jiwoo, is it okay if Jinsol spoons you?”

Jiwoo wails deafeningly through her sobs. “*SOOYOUNG WOULD SPOON ME EVERY NIIIGHT!*”

“THAT IS THE POINT!” Jungeun whisper-screams. “PLEASE LOWER YOUR VOICE! OUR DAUGHTER IS ASLEEP!”

Jiwoo wails even more, but nods and Jinsol wraps an arm around the other woman comfortingly.

“M-Maybe it was my fa-ault-” Jiwoo hiccups.

“*NO!*” The Kims exclaim in unison - now they’re the ones being loud.

“It is Sooyoung’s fault, always,” Jinsol asserts confidently before Jungeun promptly kicks her in the shin under the comforter.

Jiwoo begins to cry quieter now, while the two women act as her emotional and physical support system. “I t-told her, I- I told h-her it was over, b-but the thought of leaving her, I can’t- I don’t...”

Jungeun gently moves away teary strands of Jiwoo’s chocolate brown hair that stuck to her face, while Jinsol hugs her a little tighter.

“Jiwoo I don’t know what happened,” Jinsol says softly in her ear, “But you are a phenomenal force of nature, and- and talented, and the *kindest* soul, and if she really hurt you terribly you don’t need Sooyoung-“

“I would never love *anyone* the way I love her,” Jiwoo whispers faintly.

“Jiwoo.” Jungeun comes closer to wrap her arm around the woman and her wife. “It’s going to be alright. You will be ok. Hyejoo will be ok. Everything will be ok, I promise.”

Jiwoo nods, continuing to cry softly into Jungeun’s shoulder. The married women hold each other tightly trying to comfort their friend sandwiched in between them.

Jungeun eventually drifts off to sleep like this, as does Jinsol.

Jiwoo does last, dreaming of the better days for her family she’s never had, and wondering what Jungeun and Jinsol got right that her and Sooyoung never could.

Chapter End Notes

spring fling next w6ssup - daniela
also p.s. listen to naughty by irene and seulgi when it comes out it’s better than
monster i’ll say that much

HEEEY what did you think :D More coming very soon... - Cat

CuriousCat: curiouscat.me/yoojungsua

Twitters: @igbtchuuves (CAT) @jiwoorene (DANIELA)

Spring Fling

Chapter Notes

We have been looking forward to sharing this chapter with you for so long. It is one of our favorites. Please enjoy :) We appreciate all of you every day <3 - Cat

i like this chapter. a lot. also not to subject u to men but inception by ateez is so fucking good - daniela

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See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Mom?” Sooyoung calls out from the backseat. Her mother mumbles at the front.

“Can we stop at the store?”

From the rearview mirror, Sooyoung observes the way her mother’s eyes narrow.

“What for.”

“Can I please get new shoes for school,” Sooyoung asks politely, hesitantly. She’d put the request off for days, weeks now, but the walk has become completely unbearable. “The fabric is wearing. My feet really hurt.”

Sooyoung waits in agonizing silence for her mother’s reply.

“Mom?”

“You cost too much money.” Sooyoung’s mother remarks irritably, scowling at her through the mirror with those piercing, exhausted eyes, as if to convey just how much of a burden her child truly is.

Immediately, the eight-year-old shrinks into her seat. She apologizes.

She’s probably right, they should be saving all the money they can, anyway.

Sooyoung holds her tongue, and notes never to bring up her needs again.

The high tide roars beside the bluffs of the Kims’ estate. With the ocean wind whipping at Jiwoo’s hair, she shields her face as she waits while the tinted black SUV rolls up to the road. As she recognizes the familiar driver, Jiwoo’s eyes already become misty.

Jiwoo runs at the first sight of her daughter nearly stumbling out of the vehicle.

She cries before Hyejoo does, her mother's heartbreak ringing right against the hair over Hyejoo's ear. Jiwoo's frantic sobs drown out the relentless crashing of the ocean, and Hyejoo cries in a way she would never let herself do in anywhere other than in Jiwoo's embrace.

For once, her mother is not holding her with the crushing force of her overbearing love, but with the fear that any second now Hyejoo may shatter into pieces and never experience the life she gave to her ever again.

"I'm so sorry," Hyejoo chokes out. Had she chosen any other words to deliver that night, had she simply never chosen to stand on that stage in the first place to put her pain on display, she would never have had to hear her mothers screaming at each other in their home. "I'm so sorry Mommy-"

Jiwoo wants to shush her to calmness, but cannot find the voice.

"It's okay," she barely whispers, not in forgiveness, but out of clinging to any thread of control over their world. "It's okay, it's okay-"

"It's all my fault," Hyejoo cries hoarsely, while Jiwoo holds her impossibly closer.

"This is not your fault sweetie," she says, but Hyejoo doesn't believe her, repeating *No, No*, and Jiwoo breaks their embrace to look her sobbing daughter in the eye. "This is not your fault," she says through her own tears, and sees the way Hyejoo is now biting the inside of her lip and violently trying to keep it in, just like Sooyoung does.

Jiwoo neglects her own tears and wipes the steady streams of her daughter's with her thumbs. "This is not your fault," she repeats, while Hyejoo eventually nods her head in her mother's hands. She sobs again, and Jiwoo takes her into her arms once more.

"Sweetie, pack a bag when you get home okay," she whispers, causing Hyejoo's blood to freeze over at the reality of her home being severed into two. "You're gonna stay with me at the hotel."

(Jiwoo did not change her flight last night with Jungeun, but instead raised hell to uproot and relocate the entire operation of MasterChef Junior. She threatened to quit her role entirely, and *would have* without a second thought if that's what it took to be here for her daughter.)

But Hyejoo suddenly freezes up. "No," she says tearily.

Jiwoo looks at her daughter in anguished confusion. "What?"

Hyejoo hurts looking into Jiwoo's kind, loving brown eyes, but is unwavering.

"Hyejoo please come stay with me," Jiwoo insists, "You can bring *anything*, and Dog, please, the three of us can stay for as long as you like-"

Jiwoo stops talking at the sight of Hyejoo shaking her head profusely.

"...Why?" Jiwoo rasps.

Hyejoo wants to go with her, she truly does. But it's the fact that if she leaves the family estate, Jiwoo may never have a reason to come back home.

"No... I want to be at home," Hyejoo lies through her teeth. The thought of facing Sooyoung again and again *alone* makes her sick to her stomach, but she's not sure if she would live through Jiwoo being gone forever. "Let me stay at home."

Jiwoo is about to object.

“Please,” Hyejoo begs with all her heart.

Please don't leave us.

Jiwoo takes a moment to process what her daughter is asking her to do. She sees the pleading look in Hyejoo's eyes and doesn't want to put her through anymore than what she already has. After all, this is what Hyejoo wants, and that's most important.

“Okay.” Jiwoo agrees with difficulty, trying to form a closed smile to show Hyejoo that she had someone on her side. “But we're gonna have to work something out.”

The Ha mansion is hollow and lifeless, as Hyejoo and Sooyoung have both found themselves lost without the sun they orbit around.

Jiwoo's baking supplies still rest on the countertop, untouched.

The estate is entirely closed off, and no non-familial affiliate is allowed in or out. Not the cleaning crew, not the chefs, everyone save Eunseo (who is being unapologetically short with Sooyoung). The CEO will not risk word of their marital distress breaking out.

Sooyoung has sent mountains of desperately apologetic texts to her wife. From novel-length statements of regret, to her begging for Jiwoo to just say *something*, none of her pleas have been so little as marked read.

It's only been a night, but Hyejoo still hasn't seen Sooyoung since she watched her break down in front of her. She would rest her head on her mothers' door sometimes, hoping to hear anything from Sooyoung on the other side - maybe Jiwoo, even if unlikely - but hears nothing at all. (Little does she know her mothers' room had been soundproofed, designed specifically for Hyejoo to hear nothing anyway.)

Hyejoo washes the dried tears off her face, getting ready for Eunseo to take her to school after seeing Jiwoo. She has arranged for her daughter to spend some time with her at her hotel as much as Hyejoo would allow.

From the moment she arrives home in the deathly quiet house to the moment she climbs into the Range Rover, she doesn't see Sooyoung at all.

“You're going to sit here and tell me that you honestly, *honestly*, think Pregnant Nicki Minaj could beat Yeri's mom in a fight!?”

St. Jihyo's patio area is bustling with middle schoolers as the gang sits together at their usual round table for lunch. Chaewon is exasperated as she stares back at Yeojin.

“Nicki is pregnant. Irene is a tank. Who's gonna fight back? The baby?” Yeojin deadpans in all seriousness, while aiming another sporkful of mashed potatoes to the window where Nayeon, Chad, Jeongyeon, and Dahyun sit.

“The baby is probably a better fighter than 20 Irene's combined.”

“I think Irene could outmatch Nicki any day,” Choerry perks up.

“And I think you have mental illness!” Chaewon says.

Immediately, the girls wince at Chaewon’s choice of words.

All of them felt like they were walking on eggshells ever since the night of Dinner & Spoken word last week. After the competition had ended, it was clear to them that Hyejoo was not in her normal state. Instead, she had been replaced with something even much quieter, much more dismal - the past few days have turned her empty. Hyejoo’s barely talked to them since the night she won.

She sits at the table looking down at her fingers, picking with the peeling paint of the grated table top silently. The other girls carefully spare glances at her.

But over the past few days, they didn’t want to make her even more uncomfortable with pressing questions, so they had just continued normally... even though everything about their dear friend was worrying them.

To be frank, the four eighth graders truly don’t feel adequately equipped to properly respond to the gravity of Hyejoo’s emotions. But they all wish they knew what to say.

“Yeri Kang!” A girl calls, snapping everyone out of their awkwardness. She approaches the Tiddie Jugglers’ table and moves closer to the diva in training.

“Heyyy, what’s up Sejeong?” Yeri says leaning back.

“So you know how Spring Fling is around the corner...” The girl trails off, making the rest of Yeri’s friends (save Hyejoo) side eye each other.

“Yes! I’m going to be showing everyone up, you already know.” Yeri raises an eyebrow as she tosses her brown hair. “What about it?”

“Well, I was wondering if you wanted to go with me. Like, as my date?”

Yejin chokes on her water and Choerry pats her back. Even Hyejoo giggles, just a bit.

“Aw! That’s so nice but... I’m actually... going with my friends already!” Yeri says looking at the others for backup.

“Yeah!” Chaewon says nodding her head. “We already planned that. In detail. You can come with if you sign my petition to make me the godmother of Nicki Minaj’s baby-”

Yeri sends her daggers reminiscent of her mother’s. (The PTA President one. Seulgi doesn’t know how to glare at anyone.) Chaewon backtracks immediately. “Just kidding. It’s already been planned and we are going as a group. Sorry.”

“Oh, well that’s okay! No worries. I’ll see you guys around then!” Sejeong chirps, a hurt smile lingering on her face as she walks away.

Yejin waits until the girl is out of earshot before opening her mouth. “What the fuck was that about?”

“People have been asking her all day.” Hyejoo says, shocking her friends a little after not having spoken for the majority of the lunch period. “It’s weird.”

“God I hate you.” Yeojin says and Yeri winks back at her. “Speaking of Spring Fling, are we all

seriously going as a friend group? No one has an actual date right?”

The table all nod their head, Hyejoo hesitant but still nodding along.

“Well actually I-” Choerry doesn’t finish because a pair of arms suddenly wrap around her shoulders.

“Hey beautiful.” Chad says, lowering himself to give his girlfriend a kiss on the cheek.

The entire table nearly vomits at the interaction save for Choerry who blushes.

“I have a date...” The pink haired girl finishes.

“What, like the fruit?” Chad asks.

“I’m surprised you even know that that’s a fruit, asscracker.” Yeojin says, a disgusted look on her face.

“Yeah my mom has some in my house I fucking hate them. Just like I hate her,” Chad responds matter-of-factly, sitting down in between Yeojin and Choerry. Chad begins to take from Choerry’s grapes Jungeun packed for her.

“No baby, I was saying that you’re my date! To Spring Fling!” Choerry says, patting her boyfriend on the shoulder.

“Oh right yeah.” Chad says, chewing on the grape with an open mouth. Yeojin scoots her chair so close to Yeri that she’s nearly sitting on her. “Hi friends,” he says, while the other girls do not return the greeting.

“They wanted to know if I could go with them in a friend group.” Choerry explains and Chad nods, confirming his understanding.

“Well if that’s what you want to do I can meet you there. My dad gets home late that day, so it would actually work out better. ‘Cause then he could take me instead of my stupid ass mom.”

“Why are you always talking shit about your mom?” Hyejoo asks suddenly.

“Because my mom sucks ass. Guess we got that in common, don’t we?” Chad says straight to Hyejoo’s face, and notices all the girls glaring at him, *hard*, even Choerry. “Sorry.” Chad backtracks. “Just heard about your poem thing... Thought it was... Metal.”

The table waits anxiously over Hyejoo’s response but she just sighs and continues to pick at her tray.

“I don’t have anything in common with you or anyone,” she mutters lowly. Only Chaewon hears it, and the words tug at her heartstrings.

“Well... Anyway!” Choerry says trying her best to change the subject and brighten up the group’s mood. Hyejoo shoots her a look for a split second; she’s so sick of being ignored.

“That would be great Chad! Ugh, I’m so excited for Spring Fling! Even if we don’t win King and Queen, we still get to *slow dance* and that’s what I’m most looking forward to. I mean, isn’t that going to be so romantic?”

Chad simply nods with a smug, boyish smile. “So romantic. I can’t wait for that too.”

Choerry feels as if her heart is about to burst. For a while now, Chad had seemingly done a complete 180 in terms of being a good boyfriend. He always responded to her texts, stayed up with her late even. And now he was making an effort to sit with her friends? *AND* he started wearing deodorant? What a sweetie.

It was perfect timing, too. Being able to dance with her boyfriend at her first ever school dance was something Choerry had always dreamed of, especially with all the times she's seen her mothers dancing in the kitchen when they thought Choerry wasn't watching. And now, that old dream was about to come true within a matter of days!

"Well, I'm gonna head out early. I gotta go talk to Coach Mingyu about the thing next week..." Chad says and Choerry just nods in acceptance. (Coach Mingyu been asking a lot of him lately.) He sends the rest of the girls a peace sign before jogging out of the cafeteria.

"...Today just doesn't make any sense to me, I've decided." Chaewon says, a grossed out look still on her face.

"What do you mean?" Choerry asks, as if any of what just happened was normal.

"That meatloaf has never talked to us without fighting, ever." Yeri says straightforwardly.

"Yeah and he didn't stink either." Chaewon remarks. "I could actually feel my nostrils around him for once."

"He's changed recently! He has been such a gentleman to me. It's like he's been in a good mood all of a sudden... I don't know what it is, but I hope he keeps it up." Choerry smiles happily as she looks at her concerned friends.

"Wow, he's *so* brave. He took a shower," Yeojin says sarcastically. She notices Choerry's shoulders slump a little bit at her words and for some reason, she feels bad. "But I mean if you really think he's better Choerry..."

"I do!" Choerry says. "And I'm happy," she says pointedly at Yeojin, to get her best friend to back off of her now-happy relationship.

"Whatever," Yeojin sighs with an eye roll.

"Now let's start planning our group Spring Fling because I have so many ideas!"

The table groans, but no one stops Choerry from going on and on until the bell sends them to their next class.

The mechanical sound of printing paper fills the office of St. Jihyo's Academy. It's bright and early in the morning, Secretary Yongsun's nails click her keyboard as the aroma of her coffee spreads throughout the small area.

Hyunjin stands over the copy machine, collecting the endless flyers that zoom out of it.

The highschooler was reporting for her first full day on the job as the principal's assistant. The teacher's aide program allowed Hyunjin to assist hands on at the middle school on certain days, while still getting full credit for attendance at school. How this was even possible, Hyunjin had no idea. On top of that, her new boss had granted her permission to leave a little early every day so she could still make it to soccer practice.

Hyunjin was hesitant to rejoin the team at first. A lot of the doubt had to do with the fact that Ryujin had finally risen from the shadows. She had recovered from her broken nose, passed her physical, and made her name first on Dalla High's varsity soccer team try-outs list. It was worrisome for Hyunjin to even be in the same school as the other girl, much less a smaller space where they had to work together. But neither of them had caused any trouble for each other since New Year's.

After considering it for a while, Hyunjin had decided to sign up and attend the tryouts. It was unbelievably awkward whenever she was around her old friend. But otherwise, things had gone well and she had made the team once again for the spring.

Except Ryujin is to be Hyunjin's co-captain.

The babysitter wouldn't have been able to make the decision to follow through without the intense encouragement of Lia... and someone else.

Heejin: you were always great hyun! they would definitely take you back. and so what if ryujin's there again? you shouldn't let that stop you

Hyunjin sighs thinking about the text from Heejin she received days ago. The childhood friends had been texting sporadically, mainly because if they were to speak in person, lingering feelings might just catch up to them.

Not that they hadn't already. Hyunjin's stomach dropped whenever the other girl would send her something as simple as an emoji.

And then there was Lia, who was still as wonderful as ever, only making Hyunjin even more confused...

She was glad the teaching assistant job showed itself when it did. At least she could get away from the drama for a few hours. Hyunjin lifts the top of the copier to flip the paper around.

"And this is the main office, or as I like to call it, The Batcave, because sometimes Secretary Yongsun reminds me of a small bat." Principal Haseul's voice echoes in the hallway. "Oh, Hyunjin!"

Hyunjin turns her head and feels as though she's just been smacked in the face.

"You know Heejin right? You go to the same school!" Haseul says, gesturing to the girl next to her. "She's going to be Ms. Wong's new assistant! Ms. Wong is our eighth grade art teacher."

Sure enough, Heejin is standing right in front of her, right next to her new boss. She's got on black jeans, a white button up and her signature black converse that bring up way too many memories for Hyunjin to think about right now.

"Yeah we're... friends..." Heejin replies awkwardly, not actually knowing what she and Hyunjin were. It's not like there was an easy word for childhood best friends who had feelings for each other but never knew about it because their other best friend was jealous and did sketchy shit behind their backs.

"Uh, um- yeah! Hey- OW." Hyunjin had taken her hand off of the top of the copier to wave hello which sent it slamming down on her other hand.

Haseul rushes forward to inspect Hyunjin's hand. "ARE YOU HURT? I CANNOT HAVE AN EMPLOYEE MAIM THEMSELVES ON THE JOB. NOT AGAIN!"

Hyunjin nods quickly, and Haseul lets out a sigh of relief.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Heejin peeks out from behind Haseul to ask, making Hyunjin turn slightly red.

“YEAH!” Hyunjin shouts a little too loudly, making Secretary Yongsun cringe in the corner of her eye. Hyunjin clears her throat. “Yeah.”

“Well, GOOD!” Haseul shouts back and smiles, making Hyunjin divert her eyes from Heejin once again. “I’m glad you’re here actually,”

“You sent me down here.” Hyunjin replies bluntly, her voice still a little too loud.

“And I’m glad I did! Because I need to tell you both about the project you will be doing in order to maintain the program certificate!” Haseul claps her hands together. “In addition to helping your respective teachers, you also have to plan a very special event for the end of the year here at St. Jihyo’s! What is the event you ask? Well... that’s up to you.”

“Isn’t that... a lot I mean we still have school and stuff...” Heejin asks, a little concerned.

“Don’t worry! Our PTA President Irene will be working closely with you, and that woman gets a lot of things done... Okay, maybe closely isn’t the right word because you will hardly ever see her. Basically, you think of an idea, find out all the information and figure out all of the numbers blah blah and Irene will secure it all for you. She’ll handle the paper signing, but you just have to make sure everything runs smoothly. Make sense?”

The two high schoolers look at each other, clearly not fully understanding, but both nod their heads anyway.

“Great!” Haseul sends them both a thumbs up with each hand. “So, I will be asking you both to help with a few things this week. Ms. Wong would usually be in charge of making the decorations for the Spring Fling dance this weekend, but since you are assisting her Heejin, we would like to ask if you will do that on the days you are here.”

Heejin smiles, giving a firm nod.

“And Hyunjin once you’re done with those flyers, you can actually meet up with Heejin and help her out! Also, we are going to need some extra hands on the floor at the actual dance, so it would be really great if you both could help chaperone this Saturday night as well. You’re actually going to be doing a lot of assistant work together. So convenient you girls are friends right!?”

Haseul brings both girls into a very uncomfortable group hug. With both of their heads on the principal’s shoulders, they look at each other.

Heejin has to stop herself from giggling, and instead there is a happy smile on her face that sends butterflies off inside Hyunjin’s stomach.

“Right.”

“Yeri please! *Please* be my date to Spring Fling.”

“Oh for the love of God Mark! Are you really that desperate?”

Yejin cackles from the locker right next to Yeri's. "If you need a date that bad Mark I'm sure your mother would be willing to be yours."

"Please, Yeri." The boy pleads, ignoring the class clown.

"Sorry, that's gonna have to be a no sir. But thank you for these!" Yeri graciously takes the bouquet of flowers from the young boy's hand and then shoos him away. Once he is out of sight the tall girl throws the flowers in the trash.

"Yeri, what the hell is wrong with you?" Chaewon says, approaching Yeri and Yeojin's lockers, her bright pink backpack hanging off of her shoulders. "You haven't accepted a single date to the dance this week and the thing is in two days. It's getting weird! Even for you."

"She rejected another one?" Hyejoo says, making her way over to her friends now too.

"Yeah! I mean it was a boy so, valid, but still." Chaewon explains. Hyejoo leans on the locker next to her quietly, staring off into the busy hallway.

Yejin closes her locker. "You should've seen my face when she rejected Mia... like she's not my type but still. I have eyes."

"Since when is Mia not your type?" Yeri asks. "Since when is any girl not your type?"

"Don't change the subject," Yeojin's eyes narrow. "Why haven't you said yes to anyone?"

Yeri rolls her eyes and closes her locker. "I just don't want to go with any of these people. They're all boring and plus, they wouldn't be able to handle *this*."

Yeri does a body roll that makes the other girls look away in disgust.

"Is this about that Valentine's th-" Chaewon starts, but is cut off by Yeri covering her mouth. Yeojin and Hyejoo look at each other in confusion, but just decide to drop it. Especially since Yeri looks like she's about to gouge Chaewon's eyes out.

"Hey guys!" Choerry appears in front of them, her fuzzy keychain swinging from side to side on the back of her book bag as she bounces up and down excitedly. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Yeri's weird rejection problem. Why do you look like you're going to pee your pants." Yeojin asks, looking at the other girl fondly.

"THE FLOWERS ARE BLOOMING!" Choerry cheers way too loudly, as if she's been holding it in all day.

Yeri promptly removes her hand from Chaewon's face and they all look at her questioningly.

"What?" Yeojin crinkles her face.

"THE FLOWERS! The poppy field! Haven't you ever seen it? By the hills behind the school?"

The other girls still look confused. "I don't think any of us have ever been back there," Yeri says.

"Well, the poppies are blooming, which means my favorite place looks really pretty right now and I wanted to know if you guys wanted to go see it with me? We can take pictures and stuff."

"Is that why you wore a dress today?" Chaewon asks, noting the pretty little sundress Choerry is

donning.

“Maybe.” Choerry winks causing the blonde to look at her oddly. “If we all go we’d probably have to walk-”

“I have to pass, sorry.” Yeri replies. “I don’t walk. Not in these.” Yeri lifts her leg to reveal her new designer shoes that she had tricked one of her mothers into buying for her. It’s not hard to guess which one.

“I’m going to the arcade actually. It’s half off tokens today. AKA, I bully the worker into not making me pay full price.” Chaewon remarks,

“I have to go home or else my mom will blow up my phone.” Hyejoo says truthfully. Jiwoo would worry if Hyejoo wasn’t in Eunseo’s car the second school ended. But still, she feels a little bad to have to ruin Choerry’s excitement. “Can’t you ask... Chad...”

“He was going to come, but then they called a surprise Track meeting.” Choerry responds, a little less enthusiastically. “I wanted you all to come with too, but if you’re busy...”

Yeojin can tell that Choerry is trying to remain positive even though she is actually a little bummed out from her friends’ responses so far. The shortest girl closes her locker and slings her backpack over one shoulder. She didn’t really feel like walking after a long day of classes, plus she had just gotten a new industrial microphone delivered and was dying to record her new single “Kumbia Queen ” with it. But she didn’t want to see Choerry sad either.

“I’ll go with you.” Yeojin says flatly, making Choerry’s face immediately brighten up like a floodlight. “Really?!”

“Yeah, sure.” Yeojin shrugs. “I have nothing else to do. Seems cool.”

“Yes! Okay, it will be so worth it I promise!” Choerry cheers.

“Alright well I have to go ladies. My mom is outside and if I stay in here too long she’ll start searching the school like a bloodhound. See you guys tomorrow!” Yeri waves goodbye to her friends as she makes her way towards the exit.

“Shit, I should go too! If I get there before 4, Key will let me climb onto the skeeball machine and cheat for tickets until the manager gets there.” Chaewon says, suddenly looking at Hyejoo. “You really can’t come with?”

Hyejoo shifts uncomfortably. “Yeah, I’m sorry. Eunseo is already outside actually... I gotta go.”

With that Hyejoo turns to walk down the hallway, leaving Chaewon to wave at the remaining girls and walk out slowly behind her.

“Are you ready to see the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen in your LIFE?” Choerry enthuses, turning to Yeojin.

The shorter girl doesn’t think she’s ever seen her best friend have such a joy filled smile before.

“Lead the way Madam President.”

It had been about 40 minutes since Yeojin and Choerry had left the St. Jihyo’s campus, and Yeojin

was almost positive that Choerry actually had no idea where she was going.

“I feel like you’re leading me to a murder location. Or a crackhouse maybe. Definitely one or the other.” Yeojin remarks, her feet beginning to drag across the grassy land Choerry had been taking her through.

Choerry rolls her eyes playfully. “Relax, it’s right over this hill. USE YOUR LEGS!” Choerry screams jokingly as she watches the smaller girl struggle up behind her.

Yeojin trudges up to Choerry, panting as the hill takes a toll on her breathing.

“This better be- woah.”

As Yeojin makes it to the peak, she sees an ocean of poppies running for seemingly endless miles. Yellow, orange, and pink flowers sway in unison in the Southern California breeze. “Wow,” Yeojin breathes out, while Choerry beams at her for liking the surprise.

In front of it, near the side of the road is a small white building, where she can make out a few empty outdoor tables. “How do you even know about this place?” Yeojin questions, the light of the sun bouncing off the brilliant flowers. “We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“It’s so pretty right?!” Choerry shrieks excitedly. “There’s an ice cream shop down there that my mom likes to take me to every spring. I’ve always liked looking at the flowers more though... Well okay, it was about the same as eating the ice cream but still!”

“Why?” Yeojin asks a little too bluntly than she anticipated to. She pauses for a second, not sure if it was something Choerry would even want to share. Curiosity was getting the better of her though. “I mean, why did your mom take you here? If you want to tell me obviously...”

Choerry thinks for a moment and Yeojin almost tells her to drop it before she responds. “Mmm, well... When my mom was busy-”

“The fish doctor?” Yeojin questions.

“Yeah,” Choerry says, still admiring the flowers. “When she started getting busy with work... and stuff, I got kinda... sad. And after school one day, it just was worse than other days. I guess my other mom felt bad about it and wanted to make me feel better. So, she drove around until she found this place and now we come back at least once a year to have a cone. But since I have friends that will actually come with me now, I figured I’d ask you guys to join too! It can be our new hangout or something. You know, when McDonald’s isn’t the move...”

Yeojin nods, looking out at the field. Yeojin would be lying if she said the thought of Choerry being comfortable enough with her friends to bring them here didn’t make her a tad bit emotional.

She was thankful and to be honest, a little bit in awe, of the fact that Choerry always felt comfortable enough with her to talk about feelings. No one else ever really came to Yeojin for anything other than to joke around.

But then again Choerry had also asked Chad to come with her here so maybe it wasn’t really that personal... Yeojin feels a pang of disgust.

Of all people, why did Choerry choose CHAD?

Yeojin snaps herself out of her thoughts.

She shakes it off and turns back to the other girl. "I will give you this one Choerry. This place is pretty sick."

"Well we're not even in the field yet! Come on!" Choerry giggles, pulling Yeojin by the arm as they fly down the hill. The warm wind hits their faces as they make their way down and it takes everything in Yeojin's power not to stumble over her own short legs.

Right before they reach the bottom, Yeojin loses her balance, tumbling down the small remainder of the hill.

"Are you okay?!" Choerry asks once they get to the bottom, concerned but clearly trying to hold back laughter.

"DON'T EVER MAKE ME RUN AGAIN." Yeojin shouts, her face in the grass, sending a smiling Choerry to the ground next to the other girl. The pink haired girl's fruity shampoo blows in her friend's direction as a breeze flows through the field.

Has Choerry always smelled this nice?

Yeojin sits up quickly, the sudden thought feeling like a glitch in her brain. "So are we going to take these pictures or what?"

"RIGHT!" Choerry gets up, smoothing out her dress and pointing down the rows of flowers. "I like these the best."

The class president leads the way to a patch of some high yellow flowers, Yeojin trudging quietly behind her.

"Here, you can use my phone." Choerry pulls out her iPhone and hands it over to her friend.

Yeojin takes it, their hands brushing as it happens and she nearly slaps Choerry trying to pull her hand away at a ridiculous speed. The taller girl looks at her slightly confused and honestly, Yeojin can't think of a reasonable explanation as to why she just did that.

What is happening?

Suddenly, the principal's daughter has become utterly hyper aware of everything Choerry is doing.

Yeojin just clears her throat. "Um, sorry, thought I saw a bug."

She taps the screen only to see a picture of Chad as the other girl's lockscreen. It bothers her even harder than usual. She swipes at the screen, and for a second gets a glimpse of her bothered face through the front camera displayed on the phone. She glares at herself in confusion. She hits the swap arrow to get the lens on Choerry.

"Okay, the photographer is ready for you President Kim!" Yeojin says panickedly, holding the phone out in front of her in an exaggerated manner.

Choerry smiles and begins posing, spinning around to let the skirt of her dress catch in the wind.

"That's right hun, give me Claritin Clear commercial!" Yeojin shouts jokingly.

Choerry lets out a melodic laugh, and it makes Yeojin feel as though the entire world has suddenly switched into slow motion.

She looks through the phone screen at her best friend laughing a short ways away from her.

Choerry's smile is so big that her eyes have turned into small crescent moons. She looks so bright and happy that Yeojin wonders why the girl even wanted to have the field behind her for these pictures, when she outshined every single flower there.

She's so pretty, Yeojin thinks. Well, Yeojin always thought Choerry was pretty, that was a given. Even before they became friends, the smaller girl could see that.

Yet there is something about her presence, right now, that made it seem like she was looking at her for the very first time.

The memories of secret sharing and comfortable conversations flooded the girl's brain.

There is something incredibly novel to the way Yeojin felt with Choerry, the emotions wrought were entirely unlike anything ever experienced with anyone before.

Even when the feeling of jealousy crept in when Chad was around-

WAIT A MINUTE.

JEALOUSY?

Jealousy of CHAD?!?

Why would she be jealous of that LOSER?!!

Yejin is better than him in every way and there isn't a single doubt about it. The only thing Chad had that Yeojin didn't was Choerry, and it's not like Yeojin likes Choerry.

She doesn't... right?

Yejin brings her attention back to the class president laughing in front of her, still dancing through the field of poppies as if time had ceased to exist. The taller girl makes eye contact with her, and Yeojin feels like she was just hit by a bus.

Oh my God. Yeojin thinks to herself.

Choerry continues to look at Yeojin with a smile, as her pink hair flows in the breeze, flowers dancing at her feet.

I like Choerry.

Hyejoo wipes the fresh tears from her eyes as she notices her phone buzzing at the end of her bed.

In the darkness of the bedroom, she picks up the iPhone, hoping it's something from Jiwoo saying she has decided to put her anger for her other mother aside and that she'll come home. It isn't, but the reality is the next best thing - a text from Chaewon.

chae : do u wanna play mc?

Hyejoo stares at the text for a few seconds. Minecraft isn't really what she had in mind for her regularly scheduled programming, which includes multiple-hour long blocks of vehement self-hatred. But if there's anything she doesn't feel an ounce of anger towards, it's her.

She replies with “**sure.**”

chae : :D

chae : meet me on my server this time

chae : call me on Discord

Hyejoo gets up to sit at her desk with the homemade PC, the low neon lights and the monitor being her only source of light. She puts on her gaming headset.

Dog, who was cuddling with Hyejoo as emotional support of sorts, is now up and wagging his tail with the closest facial expression a dog can have to a smile. Hyejoo smiles a little bit back at him, and throws one of his toys so the teething puppy can nibble on it (instead of her dear wolf plushie’s head!).

Hyejoo clears her throat, practices a few quick ‘Hi’s to not sound so teary, then calls Chaewon on Discord.

“Hi,” she says successfully, when her best friend picks up.

“*Hi Oli,*” Chaewon comes through, even softer of a tone. “*Are you okay?*”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Hyejoo lies.

“*Okay,*” Chaewon says, not believing it and already being able to tell that Hyejoo’s been crying. “*I wanted to show you something. Are you on- Oh I see you!*”

Hyejoo turns her character in the forest biome to see Chaewon’s blocky character (with the skin replica of Nicki Minaj from the music video of “Super Bass”) making its way toward her.

Hyejoo smiles sheepishly, even though Chaewon can’t see her. “*Hey bitch,*” Chaewon says.

“Hey,” Hyejoo laughs.

“*Follow me queen.*”

Together their two characters walk through the forest, their rectangular legs swooshing beneath them. They pass familiar structures of Chaewon’s: cottagecore architecture, a towering and very detailed replica of the Martha Stewart and Snoop Dogg baking brownies.

But they continue to walk past every bit of land Hyejoo is familiar with. “Where are we going?”

“*I have a place I never showed you before. I’ve never showed Yeojin or Choerry either. No to mention Yeri’s account is still in custody!*” she chirps, referring to the fact that Irene still won’t let Yeri get Minecraft because she tried to flush her chore calendar down the toilet two weeks ago and said it was for her science project. The girl had nearly flooded her whole house.

“Oh that’s right.” Hyejoo says, but still ponders on one thing. “Why haven’t you shown anyone?”

“*Well,*” Chaewon sighs. “*It’s really personal. I go here when... I’ll just tell you when we get there. Oh- It’s down here.*”

Chaewon leads the two of them into a cave’s entrance. Hyejoo is perplexed, wondering why the thing so personal to her is located in the depths of a ravine, but stays quiet.

Soon enough, Chaewon brings them to the other end of the tunnel, the pixelated sunlight spilling in. *"Come out."*

When Hyejoo walks out, she is in such awe, all she can do for a few seconds is capture every last bit.

The landscape looks like an entirely different Minecraft world, as everything is flat land (and must have been flattened all by hand). In front of them is a very familiar looking street.

Every detail was as realistic as Minecraft could possibly be. Every house lined up on either side of the street is positioned in the exact order they are in real life, every lawn and mailbox in place.

"You built your whole neighborhood?" she says, amazed.

"Not really," Chaewon says humbly. *"The houses don't have interiors. And I didn't set up villagers or anything-"*

"This is so amazing," Hyejoo says. "You're amazing."

Chaewon takes a second to respond. Hyejoo can't see her on the other end, but the blonde is blushing. *"Thank you Oli,"* she says through the phone. *"Here, let me show you what I wanted to show you,"* Chaewon walks her character to the Minecraft version of her and Vivi's home. Hyejoo follows. Together, they enter.

Hyejoo expects everything to be the same as it is in real life, but... It isn't. The furniture is arranged in a different manner.

"This isn't your house," Hyejoo says softly.

"Yeah, um..." Chaewon starts nervously. *"Um- I never really told you but... When I was eight my dad... Left us."*

Hyejoo just stares at her screen, shocked. She has no idea what to say. She had known Chaewon's dad wasn't in the picture but she had never known why. She didn't think it was any of her business and the blonde girl certainly never brought it up.

"...Really?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry Chae." Hyejoo says. Her tone is still monotonous, as usual, but somehow still is rich with sincerity. "You and Ms. Wong don't deserve that."

"Yeah, he..." Chaewon's effeminate, sassy tone is now replaced with a soft, somber one. *"Um..."*

"You don't have to talk about it..."

"No, it's important." Chaewon insists. *"One morning I was just sitting on the stairs, those stairs over there,"* she says, referring to the Minecraft replica. *"And I remember tying my shoelaces waiting for my dad to take me to school when I heard her crying upstairs. And I... Um... I went- I went up there and... I never saw her cry before. And I started crying too... Because I was confused."*

Hyejoo stares at the Minecraft screen with wide, watering eyes, speechless.

"She told me everything was okay... But... The closet was open and all my dad's stuff was gone..."

Um..."

"Chae-"

"Okay anyways, it's fine now, I'm okay now," she says through the line, and Hyejoo recognizes a fib when she hears one. "And um... A month later my mom rearranged all the furniture... And took all of his extra things down... And then my mom got really... sad, and was crying a lot and stopped painting anything, for a long long time. I never knew what to do and I just wanted to fix it, she was crying so much." Chaewon says, more serious than Hyejoo has ever heard her speak. "I couldn't fix it, and sometimes I used to wish it were me that disappeared instead."

"Chaewon," Hyejoo says protectively.

"No it's fine Oli, I don't think like that anymore," Chaewon says and her voice is firm. That one wasn't a lie. "The next year though, I had to switch to a cheaper school... And... And I lost my old friends too. And I know it's stupid but..."

Hyejoo looks around the Minecraft replica of the living room, and it all makes sense.

"This is how it used to be," she says, astonished that Chaewon replicated her entire house from memory down to the T.

"Yeah. So... I didn't want anyone to tell my mom about when they beat me up in the gym... Because I was really afraid she would get bad again. ...And we're all we have."

Hyejoo says nothing as she looks around the pixelated room. She feels as though she is on sacred grounds, she is careful near any of the blocks in fear that she'll break anything.

"I come here when I'm sad," Chaewon admits. "I don't know. Sometimes it feels good to play pretend. Even if only in this way."

Hyejoo doesn't have the words to express how she feels - emotions like *I feel so lucky that you trust me. Thank you for sharing this with me. You are so, so strong.* "I won't tell anyone, I promise," is what Hyejoo manages to stutter out.

"I wanted to show this to you because I didn't want you to think you were alone," Chaewon says, and Hyejoo bites her lip again to hold back a sudden wave of waterworks.

"Because I know you're sad right now... And I think you've been sad for a long time but... I know the other girls probably don't understand okay, but I do," she says, and Hyejoo mutes herself because for the millionth time, she is crying again. But this time, it's more so out of gratitude. *"I don't think they've ever had home problems... But I just wanted to show you this so you know you can talk to me about it if you ever want to okay?"*

Hyejoo realizes she can't unmute herself to answer, because she's a sniffling mess. Instead, she taps the shift button repeatedly, making her Minecraft character crouch up and down to simulate nodding.

Chaewon does the same gesture.

"I love you okay," Chaewon says softly. *"You don't need to answer back but I just want you to know that you can talk to me, and that I love you."*

Hyejoo takes a deep breath before unmuting herself for a split second.

“I love you too.”

Oh oh!

It's gonna be a big night!

We're gonna have a good time,

It's gonna be a BIG, BIG, BIG, BIG, BIG, BIG NIGHT!

Choerry sings along softly to the Big Time Rush song as she carefully brushes a kabuki makeup brush over her cheek. Does she know how to do her makeup? No, not really. Which is why Jungeun, as always, is expected to help her get ready for her big night.

The overachieving eighth grader has the entire night planned out to the T. It was the first weekend of her spring break and the dance began in just a few hours. After her shower, Jungeun would help her with her makeup, then with hair styling to perfectly complement her flowing white dress with floral accents.

Chad, for once being responsive, sent her pictures of his suit, and *Wow would they look perfect together*, Choerry thought to herself the entire week preparing for this moment. Choerry has never been one for beauty pageants, but her fairytale dream of being Spring Fling Queen was on the cusp of becoming reality.

The eighth grader can barely contain her excitement, as she squeals and runs to jump on top of her giant bed as Big Time Rush plays.

“OOOOOooOOHHH OH! IT'S GONNA BE A BIG NIGHT!” Choerry screams as she goes feral mid-air. “WE'RE GONNA HAVE A GOOD TIME!”

“IT'S GONNA BE A BIG, BIG, BIG, BIG, BIG BIG NI-”

“What is going on here?” Jungeun asks, peering her head through her daughter's door.

Choerry, embarrassed, flops down to her own bed with very red cheeks. “Nothing!” She looks up, and notices her mother's hair is in a towel. Immediately, she is stressed. “Where are you going? I thought you were gonna help me get ready?”

“Sweetie that's what I came here to tell you about, I have a meeting tonight-”

“WHAT?!” Choerry shrieks. “WHAT ABOUT THE DANCE?!”

“Calm down Choerry,” Jungeun winces at her daughter's high energy.

“But you promised,” Choerry pleads with a sudden onset of puppy-dog eyes.

Jungeun's face falls at the sight of Choerry disappointed. “I know sweetie, I'm sorry, my CEO just called.”

“What about my makeup?! What about my dress-”

“Oh I told Mom, and she's gonna come help you!”

“MOM?!?” Choerry exclaims in shock, mainly because Jungeun’s role is absolutely crucial as she knows exactly how Choerry likes things done. It doesn’t help that she’s getting short on time... Or that Jinsol’s never helped her daughter get ready for an event.

“Yes, wh-”

“You can’t just do it?” the eighth grader whispers desperately, as if Jinsol could hear her.

“No, I really need to go to this meeting Choerry, and Mom is already volunteering at your dance tonight-”

“AAAAAARGHH!” Choerry screams into her pillow in stress. It wasn’t that she wouldn’t appreciate her mother’s help, it’s just that she wanted everything to go perfectly. This was definitely a dent in that plan.

“Oh don’t be so dramatic.”

“MOMMY?! This is going to mess EVERYTHING UP!”

Jungeun approaches her daughter in her bathrobe and sits on the bed for a moment. “Stop. Everything will be fine.” To which Choerry groans. “She’ll be here at 4. Be ready by then.”

Jungeun heads back to the hallway, leaving her daughter groaning into her pillow.

Hyejoo sits at the end of a seat in Sooyoung’s walk-in closet, which is nearly the size of her living room. The cliffside view of Los Angeles through the glass wall illuminates Hyejoo’s face, as Sooyoung has agreed to help her daughter get ready for the school dance in Jiwoo’s absence.

The dress Hyejoo wears is one of Sooyoung’s. The black dress that was tailored short for her mother’s long physique is lengthy enough for her daughter, and fits the eighth grader well.

Sooyoung has gathered some of her makeup at their side, and paints Hyejoo’s face minimalistically and carefully.

For someone so draconian with words, Sooyoung’s touch is surprisingly gentle as her hand guides her daughter’s face.

Hyejoo’s eyes are closed, because why would she ever want to be with *this* mother in this close proximity other than out of sheer necessity?

She feels her mother pause. When she opens her eyes, Hyejoo sees that Sooyoung is simply looking at her daughter’s pouting face intently.

Sooyoung looks horribly worse for the wear. She forced herself to Yves Saint Laurent the day after Jiwoo left, despite her puffy red eyes from a combination of insomnia and consecutive mental breakdowns. She arrived unkempt, and threw up the bathroom of her office halfway through the day. She is now on personal leave.

Sooyoung looks at her not with adoration, nor with contempt. She is staring at Hyejoo like she is focusing hard on something, but Hyejoo just can’t make out what.

Suddenly, Sooyoung blinks a bit longer than normal as if to shake whatever thoughts occupied her mind in that microcosm of a moment. Hyejoo expects her to say something, but she never does.

Sooyoung resumes putting makeup on Hyejoo's face in silence.

Jinsol attempts to style her daughter's pink hair for the third time, only for Choerry to complain. Again.

"That's not how Mommy does it!" she whines, as Jinsol looks at her in the mirror tiredly.

"Okay, tell me how she does it then," Jinsol asks more patiently than expected from a parent in this situation. Choerry attempts at explaining it to her once more, but Jinsol still has no idea what she's saying.

Choerry groans, and almost falls backward.

"Choerry I don't understand why you're being such a brat right now...!" Jinsol sighs.

"I'm supposed to win *Queen*, Mom," Choerry says matter-of-factly.

"Okay..? Since when do superficial beauty pageants matter to you?"

Choerry groans like Jinsol is an idiot for not understanding, which makes Jinsol squint at her through the mirror annoyedly. "It's not about that, it's- it's- I just have it planned in my head okay?!" Choerry says, exasperated.

Jinsol raises an eyebrow at her, doing her best to be gentle with her hair to calm her down.

"Chad is definitely gonna win Spring Fling King," Choerry says while Jinsol snorts quietly at the ridiculous rhyme. "And I need to win Queen so we get to have our moment."

Jinsol brushes her soft hair gently. "...So what I'm hearing is that you're worried about not looking good enough for him...?"

"No," Choerry says immediately and defensively, despite them both seeing through the lie.

"Which one is Chad again?" Jinsol asks, and Choerry glares at her mother.

"My *boyfriend*!"

"...Oh still?" Jinsol murmurs with amusement, but Choerry picks up on it.

Choerry straightens her posture randomly, adjusting her angles in the mirror and Jinsol has never seen her daughter act so unlike herself. "I'm gonna be Mrs. Chad Hogan!"

Jinsol absolutely cannot hold back her laughter. "*Hogan?*"

"Yes," the class president snaps.

"Yeah, not on my watch," Jinsol makes fun of her with wide eyes trying to hold in her low giggles. She stops though when she sees Choerry fuming.

"Why can't you just support me." she says flatly.

Jinsol sighs. "Oh gosh sweetie, I didn't know you were being serious."

Choerry just frowns at her, hurt. "You know what Mom, just leave me alone." Jinsol's eyes widen

in incredulity. “I’ll do my own hair.”

“Choerry,” Jinsol starts with a gentler tone.

“I said leave me alone.” Choerry grumbles.

Jinsol doesn’t know what exactly to say. But after all, she hit a nerve, and she doesn’t want Choerry to be more stressed than she already is. “Okay,” Jinsol says with a smile, but Choerry still avoids eye contact. “Come to my room when you’re done.”

“A little higher. Yes! Right there.”

Hyunjin is helping Heejin hang streamers along the ceiling, holding the ladder and passing her the supplies as they move along. The second floor of Dr. Jinsol Kim’s yacht has been transformed into the space for St. Jihyo’s eighth grade Spring Fling dance, the closest thing a quasi-Catholic middle school could get to Prom. The CEO had offered it up as an event space at one of their PTA meetings a few weeks ago (in an attempt to outdo Sooyoung, of course, who had offered to rent out the Staples Center). Tables are set up around a dance floor and decorations covering a majority of the place.

Things had been a little awkward when they had first begun working together at the school. Hyunjin had been trying her best not to overthink every situation they were in so she could get her work done. She was here to do a job after all, and that’s what she was going to do.

However, it was still a little weird considering this was the first time they were really left alone together since Valentine’s Day. It wasn’t that they didn’t know how to talk to each other, but the fear that they would both be *too* good at talking to each other. Revisiting those feelings would just bring trouble to their lives... and they didn’t want more complications in their already fragile friendship.

“Look good?” Heejin asks, looking down at Hyunjin with a smile on her face. The tension is thick in the air between them.

Hyunjin looks back up at Heejin, who’s sporting light blue jeans and a pink crop top that hangs perfectly off her shoulders. She feels her cheeks going a little red so she immediately looks down, guilt and embarrassment filling her body. *So much for avoiding complications.*

“Yeah!” Hyunjin says, giving Heejin a thumbs up.

The other girl starts climbing down from the ladder. “Cool, now all that’s left is-”

On the last step, Heejin’s foot slips, making her fall towards Hyunjin. The soccer player catches her friend by the shoulders, keeping her from ending up on her face.

Heejin’s arms are wrapped around Hyunjin’s waist as she looks up in shock, her face heart beat racing from her fall... and how close their faces were. “Shit, sorry.”

“It-it’s cool.” Hyunjin says, basically gulping.

They’re staring at each other, still within the other’s embrace before a loud bang sends them flying apart.

“HEY KIDS! I mean... Ms. Heejin, Ms. Hyunjin.” Haseul stumbles into the room, two very thick

boxes in her arms that she's struggling to carry. "The place looks great! I think! I can't really see!"

"Do you need some help?" Hyunjin asks, about to walk over to the principal.

"NO! DON'T COME ANY CLOSER." Haseul nearly shrieks.

"O...okay?" Hyunjin says questioningly.

"These are just... a very secret surprise for everyone tonight... I don't want anyone to spoil it!" Haseul's goofy grin can be seen from behind the boxes. "Don't mind me! I'm just dropping these off and then I have to go back home to get ready! Just continue what you were doing! There is nothing illegal in here!"

Haseul cringes at herself but scurries off towards the front of the boat. Both Heejin and Hyunjin look at each other before erupting into laughter.

"There's definitely something illegal in those boxes." Heejin laughs. "You think she's selling kids drugs or something?"

"Absolutely not." Hyunjin giggles, wiping a tear coming from her eye. "Principal Haseul calls weed 'Jazz Cabbage'. There's no way she's smuggling drugs to children."

"'Jazz Cabbage'?" Heejin says through chuckles.

"She's a little odd, I'll say that." Hyunjin says.

"Mmm, I don't think you get to call people odd." Heejin smiles.

"EXCUSE ME?" Hyunjin shouts a little too loudly, only making Heejin laugh more.

"You did wear a cat tail to a family dinner once." Heejin brings up.

"I am NOT explaining this again." Hyunjin pouts, but then lets out a laugh. "She's cool though. Principal Haseul."

"Yeah. This job isn't too bad." Heejin says. "Especially since like. You're around. To talk to and stuff."

Hyunjin feels a sense of panic rising in her chest, but she maintains a calm posture.

"I mean, it's just easier getting through the day talking to you, you know? You make it more fun." Heejin continues. "I didn't know if I would get through it."

"What do you mean?" Hyunjin asks.

"Well, since I quit my job, me and my dad have been fighting." Heejin says softly, playing with the rings on her fingers. After their conversation on Valentine's Day, Heejin had put in her two weeks at Heart Shaker's. "A lot... He still wants me to go straight to college, but I want to take a year off to focus on art.. I don't know. So when I saw this volunteer thing I made him an offer... If I could complete this job program, he had to let me do what I wanted after high school."

Hyunjin's eyebrows furrow. "I can't believe he's still on your ass about your art."

"Joke's on him though... He doesn't know you work here too." Heejin smiles. "What about you? Why'd you join? You want to be a teacher now?"

“No. Well, maybe! I don’t know.” Hyunjin smiles brightly. “I just realized I’m pretty good with kids. And I like the ones here, plus I’m a good worker I think. The thought of finding something specific for me to do on my own was important to me. So I figured I’d give it a try. I want to do well.”

Hyunjin wasn’t lying. Sure she’d joined to avoid her girl problems, (which clearly, wasn’t working out in her favor) but she’d also really liked the idea of discovering a new part about herself.

“Then we will.” Heejin states matter-of-factly. “We’ll help each other be the best teaching assistants this school has ever seen.”

“I think we’re the only teaching assistants this school has ever seen.” Hyunjin says, making Heejin chuckle.

As much as Hyunjin wanted to minimize her conversations with her old friend, it just didn’t seem like it would be possible. With the amount of time they would be spending together... there was no way they could get through the rest of the year like that. Hyunjin decided then and there to not overthink things and just enjoy herself.

But when Heejin was looking at her like she put all the stars in the sky... how could she not overthink?

“Come on then,” Hyunjin says, gesturing Heejin over to where she was walking. “We have to finish the decorations before the kids start showing up.”

Colorful lights scatter across the dance floor as exceptionally well-dressed eighth graders begin to crowd the yacht. St. Jiho’s Annual Spring Fling has officially started, splashes of purple and gold fill the main hall.

“I Gotta Feeling” by the Black Eyed Peas blares through the giant speakers as the school’s class president makes her entrance.

Regardless of the irritating bickering sessions she had got into earlier with Jinsol, Choerry was determined to have the night of her dreams. She had managed to finish getting herself ready and she feels *beautiful*. She lifts the skirt of her white dress a little and lets it drop softly, back on track for her perfect dance.

Shortly following her is one of her mothers, Jinsol, who is one of the night’s chaperones. She’s sporting a beige pant suit and heels, not too revealing, but not too professional either.

“Alright, well... I’m going to my post and stuff. Let me know if you need anything okay?”

Choerry crosses her arms, still mad at her mother, but nods anyway. Jinsol awkwardly walks away from her child and into the crowd, leaving the girl at the entrance.

“WE GOT A QUEEN OVER HERE!”

Chaewon is approaching Choerry, pulling Hyejoo by the arm closely behind her. Her dress is mint green, sparkles covering the sleeveless top with her skirt swishing as she moves forward. Hyejoo is sporting a black off shoulder dress that Choerry finds simple, lovely, and incredibly Hyejoo.

“You guys look great!” Choerry remarks, making the brunette nod and the blonde do a twirl. “Is anyone else here yet?”

“Yeri, Yeri please dance with me!” A crowd of boys and girls are following Yeri as she approaches Choerry. She’s sporting a blue based flowery two piece dress and her make up matches perfectly.

“Please respect my decision to dance with none of you. Now excuse me.” Yeri says, waving them off as they follow her commands.

“How did your mom let you leave the house?” Chaewon asks, eyeing Yeri’s exposed stomach.

“I squeezed the two pieces together to make it look like one dress until she left.” Yeri explains simply. “Fucked up my back a little. You look great Choerry! Not as good as me but still.”

“Thanks!” Choerry smiles brightly at her friend, the pink-haired girl’s highlighter making her glimmer until the multicolored LED lights. Just as the song changes to one of Choerry’s favorites - “Beautiful Soul” by Jesse McCartney - the bubbly girl scans the crowd of kids for her best friend. She doesn’t see her. “Is Yeojin not here yet-”

“What the FUCK!” Chaewon says, looking behind Choerry.

The class president turns around as the speakers play the simple guitar melody and her eyes widen at the sight.

Walking into the event is their favorite jokester, except it is definitely not how they expected to see her.

The usual tomboy is wearing a gorgeous lavender dress fit for a princess, the skirt flowing elegantly towards the bottom. It wasn’t too short, but it wasn’t too long either, fitting at a comfortable length on the girl. Her makeup, yes, *makeup*, was done to utter perfection, and she had her hair down and braided in such an intricate way that one could tell how pretty it was without even needing to see the back. She was carrying a small handbag of the same color and her matching heels clicked on the floor as she awkwardly walked her way over to her friends, surprisingly not tripping over herself.

“Hey.” Yeojin says deeply, as she does, but visibly extremely shy from all the attention. Especially since the entire eighth grade class had turned their heads to look at her too.

“What’s up Beyonce?” Yeri asks jokingly, making Yeojin shove her roughly.

“No because actually... Why’d you eat this up?!” Chaewon asks, looking her up and down.

Yeojin is about to smile until she makes eye contact with Choerry, who just now realizes she’s just been silent this entire time.

“Why are you looking at me?” Yeojin asks, forgetting to breathe and her entire body entering an overheated panic. “WHAT IS HAPPENING! STOP LOOKING AT ME!”

“Jesus!” Chaewon says, not understanding why Yeojin is full-on screaming. The girl herself doesn’t know either, especially the whole reason she did dress up was to gain a little bit of attention...

“Oh- I’m sorry- I-” Choerry stammers, while Yeri, Chaewon, and Hyejoo get distracted in a side discussion about the fact that there is a chocolate fountain five feet away from them.

“You’re... beautiful,” Choerry says rather bluntly without thinking, a small smile growing on her face. Yeojin suddenly can’t look at her and Choerry worries that she’s said something wrong. “I mean, you always look beautiful obviously... You didn’t need to put any of this on and you always

look great- I just mean like you know right now you know you just, it's a really big change- not that you need to change but- Like- You just look... really *really* beautiful Yeojin," Choerry says sincerely, and only Yeojin can hear it.

"THANKS." Yeojin barks. "You know who else looks beautiful right now probably? Rihanna... Hahahaha..." Yeojin finishes awkwardly, but it only makes Choerry smile endearingly (but obviously). "You look beautiful too," Yeojin mutters under her breath.

"What was that?"

Suddenly, a lanky boy squeezes his way into the group of friends' inner circle, bringing everyone's attention back to the middle. Chad moves towards Choerry to give her a hug. "Woahhh HEY baby! You look pretty good!" he says to his girlfriend.

His pandering tone isn't picked up on by Choerry (perhaps it's the music). It sounds like he expected much less of her. Yeojin narrows her eyes at Chad, despite being almost a foot shorter than him.

Choerry's attention snaps away from Yeojin to squeal at her boyfriend. Yeojin's eyes roll so far back into her head that Yeri, the only one who notices, thinks they might fall out. Yeri looks between the class president and her delinquent in crime, but remains silent.

"Hi." Chad says, looking at the rest of the girls, only to get subtle nods back.

The song changes yet again, and the opening keys of "Danza Kuduro" by Don Omar begins to play through the speakers.

"FUCK. This song is deadass!" Chad says, making everyone but Choerry cringe. "Come on!"

"That was somehow worse than anything that has come out of my mom's mouth," Yeojin mutters loud enough for other girl friends to hear her.

Chad leaves their group to move towards the dance floor. Choerry looks at her friends, who are honestly, a little hesitant. Dancing with Choerry was one thing but dancing with Choerry and *Chad* ... Plus Nayeon wasn't too far away either...

Sensing the discomfort, a familiar voice and loyal chaperone steps up from the side of the room. "Come on guys you heard him!" Hyunjin is peeling herself off the wall next to Heejin and approaches the group of friends. "This song is deadass!"

The group laughs and Hyunjin playfully shoves Hyejoo. "Dancing with anyone is fun if you make it fun. Watch, I'll show you."

Hyunjin makes her way over to the middle of the dance floor next to Chad and starts moving her arms frantically to the beat. The surrounding middle schoolers start cheering her on as Hyejoo and her friends burst out into laughter.

Heejin, still in the corner with the decorations, watches Hyunjin with utter adoration.

"Well are you going to make me dance alone?!" Hyunjin shouts, waving the group of friends over. They immediately join her, dancing to their own beat.

Hyunjin looks up to see Heejin watching her. She knows she shouldn't do what she's about to for the sake of her own heart. But she can't help herself. Plus, what kind of teacher would she be if she didn't take her own advice? Dancing with anyone can be fun if you make it...

Hyunjin shuffles towards Heejin who looks at her questioningly. “What’s happening?”

Hyunjin grabs her hand, dragging her to the dance floor. “We’re going to dance!”

The two high schoolers join their favorite group of preteens as they move ridiculously with each other, thoughts of drama and worry escaping their minds.

Vivi had been trying her hardest not to stare at Haseul ever since she arrived.

The principal had shown up behind Yeojin, in an equally as spectacular (and a little inappropriate for her workplace) dress. Hers was a deep red, the fabric hugging her body perfectly. There was a slight slit on the leg, which Irene had immediately tried to make her staple together upon sight, but when Vivi saw her... well.

It’s too hard not to stare.

Haseul hadn’t said hello yet, too busy greeting kids and sending them finger guns with silent smiles sent back to her in return. Vivi had shown up earlier with Chaewon and had found a seat at a table near the exit.

Vivi’s breath catches unexpectedly when Haseul makes eye contact with her. She can feel butterflies beginning to move rapidly in her stomach as the principal flashes her a smile. Vivi waves Haseul over, and she happily obliges.

“SORRY FOR PARTY ROCKIN’!” Haseul shouts as the song of the same title by LMFAO plays over the loudspeakers.

Vivi almost forgets to speak now that the other woman is right in front of her. Haseul looks even better from this close up. The art teacher clears her throat and offers a warm smile. “Hi Haseul.”

“What’s cookin good... respectable woman?” Haseul stutters awkwardly but Vivi laughs anyway.

“Nothing!” Vivi says, “The kids have actually been pretty good so far.”

“I know right? One of them even gave me a compliment... it was the best moment of my life.” Haseul says, not a single sign of exaggeration on her face.

“Well you definitely deserve the compliment.” Vivi remarks, not being able to stop herself. “You look... stunning, Haseul.”

Vivi looks her up and down quickly, but it’s enough to fluster the other woman.

Haseul blushes furiously. “Thanks. You look-”

“Baby, I got the drinks!”

Both of the smiles from the women’s faces fade immediately as the familiar man approaches them.

Vivi had invited Nate as her date to the dance. She had figured that it would be a fun bonding experience and hoped it would help them grow closer. Only at *this* moment, she wished he was anywhere else.

Nate kisses Vivi on the cheek before seating himself next to her and placing two cups of punch on

the table.

Haseul feels something similar, only it was more like she wanted to slam her head into a wall.

“Haseul! Hello! We met on Halloween right?” Nate flashes a pearly white smile at the woman in red.

Haseul fights the urge to clench her jaw. Instead she puts on a forced smile. “Yes of course, how could I forget you Nathaniel.”

“My full name is actually Nathan believe it or not! But please call me Nate!” He says.

“Ohoooo let’s not get too crazy!” Haseul responds, the forced smile still plastered on her face.

Nate just chuckles. “Please sit with us!” He scoots his chair closer to Vivi, putting his arm around her.

“Oh I don’t know-”

“Please!” Vivi asks, making Haseul’s brain malfunction. She knew it might be selfish of her, but the last thing the art teacher wanted was for Haseul to leave her company. “Stay.”

Haseul gulps, taking a deep breath. “Sure.”

From the snack table, Yeojin can see her mother seated with Ms. Wong and her boyfriend. The girl had decided to get a snack to keep her dancing energy up and this was the last thing she thought she’d see. A disgusted look forms on her face as she watches them interact, her mom clearly very uncomfortable.

“God, it’s like I have to do everything around here.” Yeojin mumbles to herself. She grabs a can of orange crush and makes her way over to the table of adults.

“I just think tattoos ruin one’s professional image.” Nate is saying.

“Well that’s kind of LAME. See I actually kind of want a tattoo right here.” Haseul turns her head and lifts her hair to show the back of her neck. She also unintentionally shows her exposed back where the dress doesn’t cover and Vivi feels like she’s going crazy. She just stares with her heart in her throat.

Yejin rolls her eyes at her mother’s whorelike antics, but takes the moment to her advantage.

She opens the can of Crush orange soda and decides to go straight to Vivi’s table.

Yejin turns an entire open can of Crush upside down, and spills all of it on Nate’s expensive dress pants, pretending she slipped and fell.

“What the HELL!?” Nate screams, snapping Haseul and Vivi out of their current thoughts.

“Oh no! I think there’s a hole in my can!” Yeojin says, continuing to pour the drink even as he stands.

“Stop!” He shouts, making most people look over at the man now covered with orange soda.

“Ahhh perdon senior. ¡No entiendo! ¡No hablo ingles!” Yeojin says, ignoring the english she just spoke. Her mother and her had been attending weekend Spanish classes at the local YMCA. Haseul wanted to do it so badly, but she didn’t want to be alone. She promised to never play “bad guy” by

Billie Eilish in the car again. “¡Perdon perdon!”

Yejin was enjoying it, actually! She’s looking forward to rap in a different language and expanding her fanbase.

“Yejin, what are you doing?” Vivi asks, not upset, just very confused.

“Perdoname señorita bonita chiquita... no hablo ingles...”

“You were just speaking English?!” Nate says, nostrils flaring.

“Ahhh no no...” Yejin can’t think of anything else to say...the YMCA hadn’t covered that yet. “PLÁTANO SANDÍA UVA MANZANA. BAILA... ¡BAILA ESTA CUMBIA!”

Yejin makes eye contact with her mother and winks before running away. Haseul has to hold in her laughter.

Once the girl is out of their sight, Nate groans clearly irritated. “This is why I can’t stand kids.”

Nate is too busy looking at his drenched clothes to notice the two women glaring at him.

Not only did Vivi have a kid, but Nate had just unknowingly insulted Haseul’s little girl.

“I need to go home and clean this stuff off.” Nate says simply, looking at his girlfriend like he expected her to stand up too.

Vivi just blinks back at him. “I can’t just leave? I have to stay here Nate, this is my job.”

“Do you really expect me to stay here looking like this? I’m dripping orange soda.” He says, flicking drops onto the floor.

“No one is forcing you to stay here, I am just not going to go with you!”

Haseul looks between the two, feeling incredibly awkward and out of place. (As if she hadn’t been already.)

“Fine.” He lets out a deep sigh and then turns to the principal. “It was nice seeing you again. Sorry I have to cut the night short.”

“No, I mean, I can see how that could... *dampen* the mood...” Haseul tries to joke.

“Ha... well.” He looks back over to Vivi. “Am I going to see you at my place later or...?”

“My *child* needs to go home after this is all over.” Vivi says, her arms crossed.

Nate looks like he has something else to say, but he holds back. Instead, he just shakes his head annoyed and walks towards the exit. “Bye Vivi.”

Vivi lets out a breath of relief she didn’t even know she was holding in, but flushes in embarrassment. “Haseul, I’m so sorry about all that.”

“It’s okay!!” Haseul says, feeling her soul come back into her body. “As our Spanish instructor once said, Ay-ayi!”

Vivi giggles. “Since when does Yejin speak Spanish?”

“We’re on the fruits chapter at the YMCA…” Haseul says, feeling warm from the art teacher’s smile.

Suddenly, “Down” by Jay Sean begins blaring through the dance area.

“WELL.” Haseul says, standing quickly. “You won’t regret staying… because I’m about to show you my choreography to this song and I’ve been told it’s pretty awesome.”

“Oh really?” The art teacher grins.

“Yup!” Haseul begins popping and locking like her life depended on it.

Vivi’s cheeks hurt from smiling as she watches Haseul make a fool of herself near the table, nearly knocking over kids and chaperones trying to get around her.

It’s like Nate was never even there. And for a minute, Vivi worries about having these thoughts. But she shakes it out of her system, not wanting to dwell on too much tonight.

Plus, Vivi thinks to herself, her eyes back to gazing at the woman dancing in front of her. *Having fun wasn’t a crime.*

Sooyoung stands alone at the end of the yacht ballroom.

She recognizes some of the kids from Field Day. They look at her fearfully as they pass, and avoid her.

There were two chaperone name tags set aside tonight for **Ha**, but she had to tell the volunteer parents with much chagrin that Jiwoo wasn’t able to make it tonight. *She had a work emergency*, Sooyoung had said, and forced a smile when the mothers requested that Sooyoung let her know they would miss her tonight.

Someone has thrown in a ridiculously old song into the mix to kick off the traditional eighth grade slow dancing session. The sleepy beginning verse of “Only You” by The Platters echo through the ballroom.

Just then, more kids pass her by.

Sooyoung doesn’t look at them, but she hears them. “These cupcakes are amazing!”

“Yeah! The lemon ones are the best I’ve ever had!”

Sooyoung’s head snaps up at the group of eighth graders, feasting on very familiar looking lemon cupcakes.

“Where did you get those?!” she snaps at them, having walked over frantically to them. They look at her with fear.

“Um… Over there!” they say, pointing to the dessert cluster adjacent to the chocolate fountain.

Sooyoung says a hasty thank you as she beats her heels into the ground, walking in way too much of a hurry to the desserts. “Milf,” one of the kids call out behind her quietly, but she doesn’t even care.

“Excuse me,” she says to Haseul, watching over the booth. “Who brought these lemon cupcakes?!”

Haseul looks at her with a puzzled expression. “Your wife did..?”

“...She was *here*?” Sooyoung asks emptily, her overwhelming sadness making her forget to seem under control.

“Yeah! She came by not too long ago actually, just to drop off the cupcakes!”

Soyoung feels a searing pain atop her heart, knowing that Jiwoo was *right here*, right within reach not too long ago. “How long ago?”

“Oh I don’t know, sorry... I think maybe twenty minutes ago?”

Sooyoung closes her eyes. She takes a deep, heavy breath.

“Is everything okay...?” Haseul asks quietly.

Sooyoung says nothing as she picks up a lemon cupcake gently and walks away from the table.

“Hi ladies and gentlemen of St. Jihyos!”

Seulgi stands happily at the mic, her wife behind her. She was the school’s safety officer, but she had also been in charge of the ballot box. She holds a small piece of paper with her talking points on it. “It’s time to announce the king and queen of this year’s Spring Fling!”

Dozens of little preteens gather around the stage excitedly, conversation buzzing between them. They settle down once they see Irene glaring at all of them.

“I will now read our nominees that were chosen by all of you! For the girls we have; Nayeon Park! Somi Jeon! Chaeryeong Lee! And last but not least, Choerry Kim!”

The crowd erupts into cheers, and Yeri, Yeojin, Chaewon hype up their friend. Even Hyejoo offers a close mouthed smile.

“For the boys; Lucas Wong, Wooyoung Jung, Matthew Kim and Chad Hogan!” Seulgi says joyfully as the crowd offers various whoops and hollers.

“And the winners for king and queen are...” A drumroll plays through the speakers and Seulgi looks down at the piece of paper in her hands.

“Chad and Choerry! Congrats, Chad and Choerry!”

The audience erupts into cheers. All for Yeojin, who feels like the gears in her brain suddenly rusted over. Still, she smiles back at Choerry, who is completely ecstatic.

She rushes forward and onto the stage, Chad walking confidently behind her. They are given little plastic crowns that are placed on top of their heads.

“Please have your dance as king and queen!” Seulgi says, the speakers playing the beginning of the duet “Perfect” by Ed Sheeran and Beyonce.

Multiple “OOOoOOoOOoOo!”s come from the student body as Chad and Choerry meet in the middle of the dance floor. Chad holds out his hand for Choerry and she takes it, her smile so big that her eyes crinkle.

Yejin feels like she's going to vomit all over the yacht's floor.

It's like Yeri reads her mind. "Do we have to watch this?"

"Nope!" Chaewon decides, allowing them all to leave the girl be with her boyfriend in peace.

Choerry feels a bit stiff as they start to sway to the music, a slight discomfort that she hadn't really expected of this night. She had practiced before of course, and she's sure if she was dancing with one of her friends it wouldn't be this hard. It's just that everyone was kind of staring at her if they weren't slow dancing themselves and for some reason, it brought some tension into her body.

"Hey," Chad says holding her close and smiling. "You look so pretty. I can't believe it."

Choerry eases up.

Even though the night had threatened to start out as something she didn't plan, everything was going well. Even if she couldn't get over the fact that this didn't feel as magical as she dreamed it would, she still felt extremely happy.

Seated at the table with Yeojin and the rest of the gang, Yeri sits filing her nails.

"Slow dancing is stupid I think." Yeojin says, her hand on her cheek as she watches the kids around her dance. "Beyonce saved this song by the way."

"You're damn right!" Chaewon says, trying to keep up with the woman's verse that was now being played out.

"You know what, we don't need to slow dance with anyone! We are strong confident women that-" Yeri suddenly stops talking when she feels a tap on her shoulder.

"Hi." A soft voiced Chaeyoung is standing behind Yeri, a hand scratching her neck awkwardly. She's wearing a cute baby blue dress with colorful pins scattered in her fluffy blonde hair. "Um... Yeri? Did you want to dance? ...With me?"

The other girls look at Yeri, waiting for her to reject another offer but instead are met with a complete surprise.

There are a few beats of silence.

"...Yeah, yeah, of course." Yeri says softly, stands up with a blush. Suddenly, she's forgotten what she was ranting about beforehand.

"What the FUCK is going on." Yeojin says, but she is ignored as the two girls walk off to the dance floor to sway to Beyonce's vocals.

"That must be who Yeri's gram was from! Ugh, that stupid bitch has been making me keep this a secret for weeks now! Remember when Yeri finally read all of the candy notes after saving them and only one person signed their name... she wouldn't tell me who it was though, saying it was secret. She has a little crush!" Chaewon says, filling in the other two.

That makes four of them.

Meanwhile at the snack area, Sooyoung stands alone, continuing to stare at her wife's perfectly done cupcakes. She had come back for seconds... fifteenths, even... the numbers didn't matter.

Jinsol, a little hungry from the night of activities, approaches the table, being sure to glance back at Choerry and snap yet another picture on her phone. (And to keep an eye on them just in case that smelly boy tried to do anything.)

She notices Yves wearing sunglasses and lets out a laugh. Maybe she should be the one to throw insults this time. What did it matter anyway?

Plus after all the constant cuddling she had to do because Sooyoung had belittled Jiwoo... she deserved it.

“Stevie Wonder makes his triumphant return I see! What happened? Did you get lost over here?”

The other CEO, snapping out of her thoughts, looks over at Jinsol. Somehow, she has one of the saddest looks she’s ever seen (which didn’t seem possible considering the size of shades she was sporting).

Jinsol stands stunned at the reaction she got, or lack thereof.

Sooyoung looks around for a bit, then walks away.

Did she just... take that?

She shouldn’t feel sorry for the woman, she was a horrible person and had treated her own wife and daughter, especially, like complete shit. Still, Jinsol wasn’t completely heartless, so she still felt a little bad.

Irritated, she huffs.

The CEO grabs a couple of cupcakes before turning her attention back to her daughter, shoving each dessert into her mouth.

Back on the dance floor, the Ed Sheeran song has just finished. “Tik Tok” by Ke\$ha had just begun, and Chad and Choerry stand with each other peacefully until Chad gets a text. He looks at the phone and then puts it away.

“I have to go do something really quick but I’ll be right back!” He smiles.

“Oooh, are you gonna surprise me?” Choerry teases.

“Don’t go anywhere.” The boy gives Choerry a kiss on the cheek and walks away.

Choerry walks out of the crowd wistfully, making her way back to the table of her friends. On the way however, she bumps into Chaewon.

“Hi!!!!” Choerry says, extremely excited. She couldn’t help it, this was turning out to be one of the best nights of her life.

“Okay calm down princess. I mean queen.” Chaewon bows mockingly, but all Choerry can do is laugh.

“Where are you going?” Choerry asks.

“I’m gonna go request something from this century. They keep playing shit from 2008, but I’m pretty sure Haseul was the one who came up with this playlist so...” Chaewon says, flipping her

hair. "Plus I'm tired of all these slow songs. It's just making all the single people feel lonely."

"Well you shouldn't feel lonely!" Choerry says, still in her magical night trance, not really thinking too much of what she was saying. "You have Olivia!"

"Friends don't count Choerry." The blonde responds.

"That's not what I meant!" Choerry says, a little slyly.

The smaller girl's eyebrows furrow together "What did you mean?"

"Come on you know..." Choerry says, sparkles in her eyes. "Olivia *likes* you. Haven't you noticed? Like she *likes* you, likes you."

Chaewon suddenly can't think of words to piece together. The little blonde can feel herself beginning to panic as the heat rises in her cheeks. The gears begin to turn in her brain, everything moving too fast, and suddenly she doesn't know what to do.

"Who said that?" She asks the class president.

"Well she did... I don't know why it's taking her so long to tell you I mean it's obvious. But now that you know you guys can slow dance together!!" Choerry says happily, clearly not picking up on the sudden tension her friend is feeling.

"I um. I have to go find her." Chaewon says, disappearing into the crowd and leaving Choerry behind.

Hyejoo has made her way to the deck of the yacht, the breeze from the ocean blowing on her skin lightly.

She just wasn't in the mood to stay inside, especially with the slow dancing still going on. The dark haired girl cursed at herself, still not able to work up the courage to ask Chaewon to dance with her.

The piano from that one John Legend song can be heard coming from inside the dance, muffled by the door. Hyejoo looks onto the ocean, inhaling deeply.

Suddenly the music becomes clear, as someone else has just stepped out onto the deck with her. Hyejoo turns to see Chaewon approaching from the main hall.

"Hey." Hyejoo says, but she notices the unfamiliar look on her best friend's face. "What's wrong?"

"Do you like me?"

Hyejoo's mouth drops open a little in shock at the blunt question. "W-what?"

"Do you like me?" Chaewon repeats. "Like, do you *like me* , like me?"

The taller girl feels nauseous. "What? I... Where did- who told you that?"

"Choerry... but that doesn't matter. Do you?" Chaewon asks again, a little softer this time.

Hyejoo can't read the look on Chaewon's face, but... she doesn't look pleased.

But what was Hyejoo going to do? She couldn't lie to Chaewon, not even about this. *Especially* not

about this. So she remains quiet.

Chaewon picks up on the silent answer and she is unsure of what to say.

“I thought we were just best friends?” The blonde questions genuinely.

Hyejoo’s heart is pounding, unwilling to believe the conversation that is actually happening in front of her right now. “I... I just... we always say I love you and stuff so...”

“Well... I mean... Oli... I never meant it like that....” Chaewon says honestly.

(Then again, Chaewon didn’t know if that was completely the truth. It was a lot to process right now.)

The beginning strums of Taylor Swift’s “Lover” begins to play, and Hyejoo can’t think of a worse song that could be playing at this moment.

Hyejoo feels like she was just splashed with a bucket of ice cold water.

Of course Chaewon never meant it like that.

Why would she *ever* feel that way about her?

Hyejoo has never felt more idiotic in her entire life.

“Oh,” is all she can sputter out.

“I just mean-” Chaewon says, realizing that maybe she could have worded her confusion better.

“No it’s.... Ahhh-” Hyejoo looks away, not wanting the tears building up in her eyes to fall in front of the other girl. She just feels like a bag of garbage being dragged across the floor.

“Oli wait,” Chaewon tries to say, but Hyejoo is already making her way towards the door.

“It’s okay. You don’t feel the same way and it’s fine.” Hyejoo says, grabbing the door handle.

“Olivia that’s-”

“I’ll see you later.” She can feel the first tear roll down her cheek as she pulls the door open.

Without another word, the dark haired girl runs into the dance, not wanting to ever step out into the light again.

Hyejoo pushes past her classmates aggressively, tears falling down her face. She doesn’t even care that some of them are losing their balance as she tries to navigate herself out of the intermediary central ballroom. “Lover” by Taylor Swift, is still reverberating through the speakers.

She’s upset. She’s humiliated. And most of all, she’s heartbroken.

Of course someone like Chaewon would never like her back. Hyejoo continues to think. Chaewon was perfect in every way and Hyejoo was just a steaming mess.

Hyejoo was beginning to anger at the fact that Chaewon had even found out about her feelings.

Especially since it hadn’t even been her choice to tell her.

“Olivia?”

Hyejoo turns around to see Choerry approaching her, Yeojin and Yeri close behind. Hyejoo can feel the heat rising in her face as her hands ball into fists.

“Hey! Have you seen Chad anywhere? I can’t find him and-” Choerry stops her own rambling once she notices that the other girl is glaring at her. “What’s wrong?”

“*Are you fucking serious?*” is all Hyejoo can muster, tears threatening to spill from her eyes once more.

Choerry’s eyes open in confusion. “What? What happened?”

“God Choerry, are you stupid!?” Hyejoo says, aggression heavy in her words.

Yeri and Yeojin have walked up to the girls now, where Choerry is just standing in shock.

“What’s your problem Olivia?” Yeojin asks.

As if I only had one, Hyejoo thinks to herself bitterly. Within seconds, every bit of sadness and anger clusters within her chest. Hyejoo has had one of the worst years of her life and tonight was just too much for her to handle anymore. The girl feels like she has reached a boiling point and the lid was about to fly off at such an idiotic question.

“WHAT’S MY PROBLEM?! SHE TOLD CHAEWON THAT I HAD FEELINGS FOR HER.”

Hyejoo finally says, allowing herself to explode. The Taylor Swift song is loud enough to cover the yell, but some of her classmates begin to look over at them. “And guess what? She didn’t feel the same way. Thanks a fucking lot.”

“Hyejoo I was just-” Choerry tries, trying to get a word in, but is immediately cut off.

“Just what?! Trying to play matchmaker so we could fit into your stupid little fantasy of living happily ever after?!” Hyejoo growls, rage basically pouring out of her chest. “Well guess *what* Choerry?! *Not everyone becomes like your perfect little parents who love each other and stay together forever!*”

Hyejoo’s teeth grind as Choerry just takes the hits in silence, anxiety growing in every inch of her body.

“I was perfectly fine with her being my best friend but you took that away from me because you wanted to prove some stupid fucking idiotic point about “true love.” I’m soooo, so *very* sorry to break it to you Choerry. But true love doesn’t FUCKING EXIST!” Hyejoo screams at her, and the music is still too loud for any of their other classmates to notice.

“I had *one* thing left in my life. *Her*. And you *fucking* ruined it because you couldn’t shut your big fucking mouth. You know, everything was going just fine until *you* came along Choerry.”

“HEY!” Yeojin yells back at her fiercely, especially after seeing Choerry wince in pain. “*Shut the FUCK up!* What are you saying?!”

“Olivia I think you need to chill the fuck out,” Yeri says. “You act like we all didn’t already know you liked her. Even *she* must have known..?!”

“Well *she didn’t*, Yeri. So *fuck you*.” Hyejoo snaps harshly. “Fuck all of you.”

The girl pushes her way past her friends and runs further into the crowd towards the exit.

“Olivia wait!” Choerry shouts, anxiety overflowing within her mind. The pink haired girl begins to run after her, but struggles to push past the crowd of eighth graders. By the time Choerry gets to the exit, Hyejoo is out of her sight.

The other two girls catch up, then notice Choerry’s breaths are becoming shorter and shorter with each one. Yeojin and Yeri look at her with concern.

“Hey, Choerry it’s fine.” Yeojin says calmly, Yeri rubbing the class president’s shoulder.

“No it’s not.” Choerry says weakly. “We need to find her. I don’t want her to be mad at me, I didn’t mean to do this and I need to say sorry right now. Please help me find her.”

You're my, my, my, my!

The sweet song blares through the yacht, trapping them in the infinity, in the chaos.

Oh, you're my, my, my, my-

“Okay, we’ll find her. Come on, I’m sure she’s still onboard.” Yeri says, and Choerry nods.

The three girls head out to scavenge the ship for their hurt friend.

Lover.

Sooyoung observes her daughter exit the dancefloor.

The woman wasn’t going to say anything at first, (she figured that maybe she just needed to pee) but the way Hyejoo was walking, her eyes glistening clearly through the dimness of the boat lights... even she could tell something was wrong.

Sooyoung bounds after her, catching up to her then grabbing her arm worriedly. “Hyejoo?” Sooyoung says, startling her daughter. “Where are you going?”

Hyejoo, looking at the last person she would *ever* want to see, looks like she’s somewhere in between crying and shouting.

But instead of doing either, she gathers all the strength she can muster to not blow up on the only person she now has left.

“Can you just take me home?” the girl asks, looking away to hide her teary face as her voice cracks.

At first, Sooyoung thinks that she should ask questions. After all, it’s her instinct to hound those she cares about when they’re upset until she found out what was wrong.

But the broken CEO wasn’t exactly her usual self. And she didn’t feel like she had enough fight in

her to argue, or affinity for this event.

“Okay.” Sooyoung says, pulling the keys to her Mercedes out of her pocket. “Let’s go.”

“She couldn’t have gotten far.” Yeri says, slightly out of breath from the running. They’ve already checked a few corridors and were making their way down a nearly empty hallway, the bass of the dance music echoing as they run.

“Maybe in here?” Choerry says, gesturing towards the women’s restroom while trying to keep herself calm. The eighth grader is honestly amazed at how well she is holding herself together.

Maybe it was the strong sense of hope she was holding onto that she would be able to make it up to her friend somehow.

The trio run towards the golden light stemming from the girls’ bathroom.

When they burst through the door, the three girls stop dead in their tracks at the sight.

And in that singular moment, Choerry doesn’t feel like herself anymore - she feels like she’s watching characters in her life reenact something out of her playbook of intrusive thoughts. It doesn’t truly feel like reality, until Nayeon and Chad both tear their mouths away from each others’ and look her in the eye.

“Ohhh shit...” Chad says halfheartedly.

Once, when Choerry was younger, her mothers took her to an amusement park. There was one ride that she will never forget that plunged straight down, as if the floor was snatched right out from under.

That same awful, alien feeling, with everything in your body rising all at once to escape through your throat, has revisited her now only to swallow her whole.

Choerry is horrified.

Nayeon smiles sweetly at the three girls with her smeared lipstick. “Can’t you see we’re having a private moment ladies?”

Yeri pushes past Choerry first, bounding towards them with a vengeance but Choerry just can’t hear anymore. The pink-haired eighth grader looks at Chad, the first person she’s trusted her heart with, held hands with, kissed, appointed as the subject of her most grandiose fantasies for love, and Choerry just can’t be here anymore.

She runs away with the first of countless tears coming to her eyes.

“WHAT THE *FUCK* IS WRONG WITH YOU, YOU BITCH!” Yeojin yells, feeling the anger build in her arms. She was seconds away from swinging on both Nayeon and Chad at the exact same time.

“And why are you so angry Yeojin? Nayeon questions, raising an eyebrow. “Are you in love with her or something?”

Suddenly, the anger within the short girl is replaced with embarrassment. She remains silent, trying to figure out a witty response, but she takes much too long.

A sick, wide smile forms on Nayeon’s face.

“Oh my God, of *course* you are.” Nayeon snickers. “With lame little Choerry.”

Yeojin has never felt more confused in her entire life. She wanted to beat the two people in front of her to a pulp, there was no question about it. But the more she thought about it, the more she would rather not waste time on them when she could be making sure Choerry wasn’t alone.

Yeri looks softly at Yeojin as if reading her mind. “Go find her.” She glares at Nayeon. “I’ll handle this bitch.”

Yeojin turns to Yeri, a grateful look in her eyes. “Okay. Thanks.”

Without another word, Yeojin runs out of the restroom and Yeri’s glare returns to Nayeon and Chad.

“What are you going to do cousin?” Nayeon tries to keep her superior demeanor but it clearly wavers at the sight of her absolutely ruthless blood relative.

(Nayeon was arguably more afraid of Yeri than Hyejoo. One of the most convenient reasons why P.E. with Coach Wonho was the best period to attack Chaewon was because Yeri wasn’t in it.)

“You guys are cousins?” Chad asks, too curious to keep quiet.

“SHUT UP!” The relatives shout at the same time.

Chad shuts his mouth. He begins to shuffle around silently, hoping he will somehow be able to get out of this.

“I’ll tell your mom!” Nayeon says, suddenly very scared, recalling said family reunion when Yeri and Nayeon’s fist fight had almost got them all blacklisted from Jollibee’s catering. “Don’t come any closer!”

“My mom hates your mom. If Auntie Joy tries anything tell her Irene will fucking murder her with a clipboard.”

Yeri suddenly lunges forward and grabs Nayeon by the hair, dragging her to the polished bathroom floor. The taller girl shrieks, grasping at her head as Yeri is still holding her by the hair.

Meanwhile, Chad tries to tiptoe out of the room, but is immediately grabbed by the shirt collar.

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING YOU BIG WHORE?!” Yeri somehow overpowers the boy, yanking him by his hair suddenly as well.

She drags them both out of the restroom by the hair on their heads and towards the yacht’s old-timey emergency exit door.

“I’M GOING TO SUE YOU!” Nayeon shouts, thrashing around to bat Yeri’s hand off of her but to no avail.

“Oh eat my ass.” Yeri says, making it out to the brisk cold air of the yacht’s dock, dragging the classmates by the hair.

Chad manages to wrestle his head from Yeri’s grip, and at lightning speed she punches him square in the face as he falls to the ground wailing and blubbering.

“No, NO NO NO-”

Yeri throws her cousin off the dock and into the water.

Nayeon comes afloat after a few seconds, screaming in anger.

Yeri waves at her with her free hand as Nayeon continues to throw a tantrum in the water. The girl is about to do the same thing to Chad before he interrupts her.

“WAIT, I’M BAD AT SWIMMING!” Chad shouts and Yeri rolls her eyes.

“Pick a struggle.” Yeri asks sweetly with a smile, before flinging him into the water.

(But near the boat's ledge, so he doesn’t die. She isn’t that heartless.)

The boy falls into the water, grasping onto the ledge of Dr. Kim’s yacht as Nayeon begins to doggy paddle to shore.

Nodding and satisfied with herself, Yeri re-enters the yacht’s interior to the Spring Fling dance, while wiping her hands off and promptly whistling to the starting tune of “NASA” by Ariana Grande.

“Fuck,” Yeojin curses to herself as she climbs the ladder to the roof of Dr. Kim’s luxury yacht in heels. She hopes to God that her best friend (crush...?!) is sitting around somewhere up here to get some space. The smaller girl had already scrambled around to search the rest of the yacht’s open rooms.

Yeojin breathes a sigh of relief when she reaches the top, seeing her favorite pink head of hair.

Choerry sits on the dirtied rooftop of the yacht, her knees to her chest. Tears steadily stream down her cheeks as she tries to apply pressure to herself in order to get the jittery feeling of anxiousness down, while still shaking from the winds of the tide. She doesn’t have any sort of jacket, only her white princess dress.

Choerry isn’t sobbing, in too much of back-to-back shock for her to react. All she can do is stare out at the skyline of the lit up pier in the distance, and try to focus on the buildings instead of the heaviness in her heart.

Yeojin grunts as she tumbles onto the cool surface, struggling to stand on her heeled feet. Once she’s up, she stands awkwardly, unsure of which route to go with her comforting strategies.

“CHOERRY DOOOOOOOOON’T!” Yeojin screams, making Choerry’s head snap up.

“D-don’t what?” The girl looks back at her with tousled pink hair, shivering.

“Haha... Thought you were gonna jump over the ledge or something.” Yeojin says jokingly. The delivery is botched, as it just sounds plain tone deaf.

“No...” Choerry says back lifelessly.

“...I’m sorry Choerry,” Yeojin says walking towards her. “I thought I could make you laugh.”

The short girl sits next to her best friend, who simply has her knees pulled to her chest, looking out and crying noiselessly.

“Hey, Olivia doesn’t mean what she said, okay?” Yeojin says quietly. “She gets angry really easily and says some things she doesn’t mean.”

Choerry nods absentmindedly. She doesn’t mean to ignore her cherished friendship, but all she can really think of is that despite everything she’s put in, she just wasn’t enough. “What can I do?” Yeojin says quietly.

Choerry sniffles, and chokes on her breaths. “I just want my mom.”

“Okay.” Yeojin says, not hesitating for a second. “I’ll go get her. Do you want to come with me or-”

Choerry is already shaking her head no and Yeojin nods, rubbing the girl’s shoulder. “Okay, but please don’t move okay. I’ll be right back.”

Choerry nods, her arms lingering as Yeojin pulls away. She watches as the girl struggles down the ladder of the roof, missing her already.

Jinsol is licking the frosting off a cupcake when she spots Yeojin the gremlin walking towards her.

The CEO squints as Yeojin approaches. She had just gotten back into the dance after a quick phone call to fix a problem at work and was now prepared to be thrown into a bad mood.

“Care to comment on my butt again?” Jinsol asks the eighth grader, but rethinks her sarcasm when she sees the urgency in the 13 year old’s eyes.

“No, no it’s-” Yeojin starts, unsure of how to say what has transpired so she just says “It’s Choerry.”

Jinsol furrows her eyebrows in concern.

“Something is wrong.”

Jinsol races up the ladder to the roof, scrambling until she sees Choerry’s pink hair falling down her back.

Her mother is quick to pace up the roof, and sit at her side on the dirty rooftop. “Hey, hey,” Jinsol says softly. She sits with about a foot of distance between them, not wanting to make her daughter feel suffocated, as Yeojin described her as. But at the same time, she begs herself to go closer at the sight of Choerry shivering and in tears.

Choerry is inhaling, but struggling to exhale, like it hurts to do so while tears run down her face.

“Baby remember what I taught you?” Jinsol says. “About five and seven?”

Choerry barely chokes out a nod.

“What do we do when it’s hard to breathe,” Jinsol asks softly.

Roughly, Choerry attempts at regulating her breathing. This was one of the anxiety attack coping techniques her therapist had taught her, and one Jinsol was familiar with as well. Slowly but surely she is able to take deeper inhales, still struggling with the exhales but making her way to inhaling for five seconds and exhaling for seven.

Choerry’s breaths deepen as she nods quietly, her mother encouraging her calmly right beside her.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Choerry repeats. “It’s gonna be okay, it’s gonna be okay,” she tries, but she can’t stop her composure from breaking and tears return to her eyes again.

“Do you want me to hold you?”

Choerry refuses, but watches as Jinsol takes off her blazer to give to her daughter. Choerry takes it, and wraps herself in it tightly. She cries harder, and it has become infinitely difficult for Jinsol to not hold her tight.

“Okay, five and seven,” she says ever so softly, attempting to even out her breathing again.

Jinsol waits a bit before speaking.

“Your friend Yeojin told me what happened,” Jinsol whispers. “I’m so, so sorry baby,” she says as Choerry cries harder in her mother’s blazer.

“*Why would he do that,*” Choerry cries. “I thought he loved me- What did I do wrong-”

“Nothing, Choerry,” Jinsol says adamantly, wishing she could protect Choerry from the entire world. “Absolutely nothing, okay?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Choerry repeats again and again until she can’t anymore.

Jinsol has always known Choerry cared about Chad more than the other way around - she’s known it since she first saw them on Field Day.

“Choerry-” Jinsol starts very delicately.

“Is it because she’s prettier than me? Because she’s skinnier than me-”

“Yerim.” Jinsol stops her immediately, because more than anything she does not *ever* want her sweet girl to fall into that vicious cycle. “No. Love *never* works that way.”

Choerry holds her knees closer to her chest yet again.

“No one’s gonna love me.”

Jinsol watches as the girl stares down at the ocean below them.

“Choerry, you are the most beautiful thing this world has ever seen,” Jinsol says so thick with emotion, smiling sadly and wishing Choerry only knew.

“You’re just saying that because you’re my mom.”

Jinsol looks at Choerry’s face, taking her body language in. “And why do you say that?”

“I just feel-” Choerry looks out like she’s so *tired*, like she’s seen all that this world has had to give and she can’t bear to look anymore. “I just feel like there are a million things wrong with me,” Choerry thinks back to Hyejoo screaming at her for her mistakes, Nayeon hurting her friends for her mistakes, Chad breaking her heart for reasons she cannot comprehend. “And no one is ever going to love those things too.” Choerry says softly.

“I know it’s probably... dramatic, okay, and you think I’m overreacting because he’s just some stupid boy but,” Choerry inhales sharply, her voice breaking. “But all I wanted was to be like you and Mommy.”

Jinsol watches in pain as the tears flow freely from her daughter’s face. Choerry continues with tears in her eyes. “Y-You just love each- each other, you’re the best parents I could ever ask for and-and- you slow dance just because you *care*, because you love her and she loves you.

“You understand each other perfectly, and you don’t have to worry about- about what you wear, or how you look today...” Choerry cries softly. “Don’t you think I want that too? I want someone who loves me for who I am too! How come *mine isn’t here?!?*”

There is a pause while Jinsol takes a moment to look at the black sea.

“...Can I tell you a secret, Choerry?”

Her daughter’s head perks up.

“Your mother isn’t perfect,” Jinsol says plainly, with a bashful smile.

When she looks back at Choerry, the eighth grader is gaping at her like she just got told Santa Claus doesn’t exist. “What?! But you always tell her she’s perfect. Are you LYING TO HER?”

Jinsol laughs to herself. “No, no you see...” She smiles, looking up at the moon in front of them both. “She is perfect to me. But what I mean by that was... We aren’t perfect.”

Choerry looks at her, admittedly getting a little anxious, but Jinsol looks perfectly at peace as she looks at the sky.

“Haven’t you ever noticed Mommy and I are opposites?”

Choerry blinks hard; she’s never considered it. They’ve always completed each other in tandem, so she’s never once looked at them in that manner.

“We have our fair share of disagreements too. We disagree over how to do things - she’s the biggest planner, I’m a little messy... She has a fierce, very strong personality, I’m a lot more sensitive... Sometimes, we really *don’t* understand each other Choerry.”

Choerry is calmed by her mother’s voice, breathing steadily now as she keeps herself warm with the oversized blazer.

“But finding your true love, I suppose...” Jinsol’s facial expression flickers, as she struggles to put

her case into words. "...is never about finding the most perfect person."

Jinsol thinks of Jungeun, smiling fondly knowing that every little part of her wife is one she has come to love.

"Choerry, it's about someone who loves you enough to do the hard thing," Jinsol says, bathing in the moonlight. "...It's never about them doing... a million of the things that come easy. Love is never about what they're good at."

Jinsol smiles wistfully.

"It's about the things that are really, really difficult, seemingly impossible for them, even. But they love you *so much* Choerry," Jinsol looks at her precious daughter, who smiles a little hopefully back at her. "That they're willing to try."

Choerry just nods reluctantly.

"I don't think Chad loved, or respected you enough to try for you," Jinsol says, and Choerry folds into herself just a bit. "I don't think he ever *knew* you."

Choerry sighs.

"But I need you to know that I didn't meet Mommy until I was... nearly twice your age. Some people don't even find what they're looking for until they're much older, and that's okay too.

"Chad was your *first ever* boyfriend- I don't even know how many dates I went on before I met her." Jinsol shrugs.

Choerry nods, understanding now.

"But one day... When I was never even looking," Jinsol closes her eyes, letting a cherished memory take her away for just a second. "She just... was right there," she whispers lovingly.

Choerry almost cries again, but she's not sad at all.

"And do you know the best part?" Jinsol asks. Choerry shakes her head.

"I thank God every single day those things didn't work out," the CEO smiles. "Because if they did, I wouldn't have Mommy, and I wouldn't have you."

Something explodes from inside the main ballroom, and Haseul thinks that maybe she made a mistake.

The principal is hiding behind a tipped over table in order to take cover. Kids are running around screaming, at the chaos exploding around them... literally.

Haseul's had left Vivi's company for a little bit to start her 'big surprise' for the night.

It's going to be so cool! She had assured the art teacher. God was she wrong.

The surprise had been a box of fireworks that she was super excited about setting off. She had just thought they were small explosives, something like a sparkler that could be easily maintained indoors.

Unfortunately, Haseul was now realizing why the box had been so expensive, and why she had to use a foreign web browser.

She had followed the instructions on the back, lighting one on fire and it had immediately gone airborne. This caused havoc among the attendees and staff as the industrial grade firework exploded into giant stars under the low ceiling of the yacht ballroom.

Everyone is currently screaming bloody murder, and to top it off Haseul fell over and lit the other ones too.

The principal had been trying to find Yeojin in the crowd since it started, but had no luck. She was growing nervous at the thought that a firework could've hit her daughter.

Suddenly, Vivi sinks next to Haseul behind the fallen table, a little out of breath. Haseul's eyes widen but she remains calm... well as calm as she can be with dozens of Disneyland-grade fireworks erupting in one room.

"This was the surprise?!" Vivi asks. She knows she shouldn't laugh, but this is just so utterly Haseul that a smile cracks onto her face.

Haseul's cheeks grow red. "Well, they were supposed to be small... Are you okay?"

Vivi nods reassuringly. "Yeah I just got Chaewon out of here but I wanted to make sure you were alright. I saw Yeojin running out too while I made my way back in."

"Oh thank god." Haseul's heart skips a beat at the words being spoken to her, but immediately relaxes at the thought of Yeojin being safe. "I'm okay. I am a little... fired up."

Vivi chuckles. "Look at you, still... cracking jokes."

Haseul blinks, then laughs maniacally at Vivi's lame attempt at a joke. It fills Vivi to the brim with joy. The woman wipes tears of laughter from her eyes to focus back on the disaster at hand. "You go, I'm going to make sure everyone else gets out safely."

"Are you sure?" Vivi starts, but a firework whizzes past her, nearly taking out her head.

"YES! GO!!!" Haseul says, pushing Vivi towards the exit. Once she sees she's made it out, Haseul starts running to other kids, helping them shuffle out safely.

Meanwhile, Yeojin is in fact speed walking off of the boat as fast as heels can take her. The other St. Jihyo's students and staff have fled to the main parking lot, illuminated by the moonlit cars starting back up. Yeojin rounds the corner through some palm trees toward her mother's orange Kia Soul, in a more isolated lot.

Yeojin couldn't believe the night she was having, if she's being honest. Her emotions were all over the place and to top it off some dumbass decided to set off industrial grade fireworks indoors. She's taking a moment to catch her breath when she hears a cry for help.

"YEOJIN! YEOJIN OH GOD, PLEASE HELP, PLEASE!!!"

The girl turns to see Chad clinging onto the side of Dr. Kim's yacht for dear life. It seems that no one had noticed him since most of the cars were parked in the opposite direction.

“The blow uppy thing!!! PLEASE.” Chad says, nodding towards the red doughnut pinned to the end of the dock. His hands slipping from the struggle he was putting up against the water.

The sight of his face alone brings Yeojin’s blood to a boil. She begins to take off her shoes instead.

“YOU ARE A PIECE OF SHIT!” The girl screams, throwing each individual heel at the boy in between words. She hits him each time, and one hand nearly loses grip.

“STOP!” Chad screams back. “I WAS JUST-”

“YOU WERE SO LUCKY! *FUCK YOU!*” Yeojin shouts, thankful that everyone else is too busy fleeing the boat to hear her. “YOU GOT TO COME TO THE DANCE WITH ONE OF THE MOST KIND HEARTED, AND HAPPY, AND BEAUTIFUL- *AGHHH!*”

The girl is irritated at her own rambling. She hated having *feelings* ; it made her feel disgustingly soft and debilitatingly awkward. The class clown rubs her temples.

“You were so lucky. Choerry is one of the best people on this planet and you *cheated* on her?! And for WHAT? BIG BITCH MCGEE? Did it make you feel better Chaddington!?”

Chad is still kicking the water furiously, trying to stay afloat. “Yeojin, please! Please!”

“*Fuck you!*” Yeojin yells, about to turn around and run to her own car.

Something pulls at her gut before she does though.

Choerry would throw the life ring to him.

Hell, she would even *pull him in* regardless of how terrible he’s treated her. Yeojin’s jaw clenches as she rolls her eyes.

Yeojin sighs, walking over to the doughnut and taking it off the dock post. She throws it as hard as she can, allowing Chad to grab onto it.

“I’m not pulling you in.” Yeojin says simply, spinning around and making a beeline to her car. She was being generous enough to not let him drown.

As Yeojin is about to approach the car door, Haseul runs up and hugs her, nearly tackling the small girl to the ground.

“ARE YOU OKAY DID YOU GET HIT IN THE EYE? HOW MANY FINGERS AM I HOLDING UP?!” Haseul shrieks, not even holding up any fingers, just embracing her child so tightly that Yeojin feels like her lungs are about to pop.

“God get off me Mom!” Yeojin shrieks, but she doesn’t put up much of a fight. She honestly needed a hug right now.

Haseul finds it odd that her daughter isn’t kicking and screaming to get out of her hug. When she pulls back, she notices the girl is missing her shoes.

“What happened to your heels?” The woman asks.

“Um... I took them off... to run faster.” Yeojin says.

“Oh okay...” Haseul says, noticing that something was bothering her daughter. But instead of

pressing further, the woman offered an alternative. “Hey! Do you want to go get some ice cream?”

Yejin looks at her mother confused. “It’s like 11pm...”

“I know my creameries.” Haseul says, wriggling her eyebrows.

“Gross. Sure.” Yeojin says, trying her best not to giggle at her mother’s weird antics.

The family of two gets into their car and right before Haseul puts the keys in the ignition, she gets a ping from her phone.

Vivi: Haseul

Haseul’s heart goes into overdrive in the span of a second as she watches the typing symbol animate.

Vivi: I’m so glad I stayed tonight. :)

Haseul smiles at her screen, and Yeojin looks over at her mom’s happiness. She was glad at least someone had a good night.

The older woman puts her phone back into her pocket and buckles herself in. Yeojin turns up the radio as they pull out of the parking lot, fireworks still seen exploding inside of Dr. Kim’s yacht behind them.

Jinsol and Choerry sit in front of the hockey glass, staring out into the ice.

A zamboni chugs along the watery ice, smoothing over the cracks, making it whole once again.

“Do you remember when you used to like these?” Jinsol says softly, next to her daughter in her disheveled white dress.

Choerry watches the zamboni make its way around the perimeter. She doesn’t remember liking them particularly, doesn’t truly recall the way Jinsol would drive them for hours through traffic so they could watch them together.

But she does feel the wave of familiarity these bleachers carry, the tinge of wistfulness she gets watching the machine gloss over the ice.

“No,” Choerry says.

Jinsol just smiles, eyes still on the zamboni.

“They used to be your *favorite*.”

Choerry looks over at her mother, watching the zamboni with a nostalgic smile for the time she will never get back.

“You wanted to come here all the time,” Jinsol recalls. “...Every day.”

Jinsol watches the machine with another smile, and Choerry begins to feel a lump in her throat.

“This was the only thing that would cheer you up.” Jinsol tells her slowly, her mind in a vivid, tangible loop of her five-year-old daughter looking back at her with that contagious laughter, filling

Jinsol with youth, admiration and everything in between. In those moments, in those times when Choerry lit up the universe, there was not a single thing more she would have ever asked for.

“I don’t know if you still like them now,” her mother looks at thirteen-year-old Choerry at her side now, leagues matured, yet still overflowing with innocence despite a night where some of it has been permanently taken. “But you liked them a lot then,” the CEO whispers, before looking out at the ice again.

For a while, Choerry and her mother just watch in silence.

“Choerry, bad things will always happen in life,” her mother advises. “People are going to disappoint you. There are going to be people who hurt you when you would never, for a second, think about hurting them.” Jinsol admits solemnly. “You can count on it. ...It’s just the way things go.”

Choerry looks sadly upon the ice.

Would the world truly be this way?

“But if you can count on anything else,” Jinsol starts. “I just want you to know that I’m so proud of you.” Jinsol admits honestly, looking at her daughter. “I am *endlessly* proud of you Choerry. I can see your future so clearly and you are going to do... Amazing things for people, for your community... For the entire world, even. Anyone on this Earth would be *so lucky* to have you. And I never, for a second, want to hear you say that no one’s gonna love you ever again.” Jinsol voices passionately. “Because you will be loved *just as much* as you love everyone.”

The zamboni encircles the perimeter again, and again. Finally, the majestic machine makes its way to the center.

When Jinsol turns to look at Choerry, her daughter is gazing at her with tears in her eyes. Jinsol wants to speak, but the words are caught in her throat.

“Mommy,” Choerry calls. “I missed you so much,” the young girl confesses with enough conviction that all those years, every single one Jinsol and Choerry spent without a conversation lasting more than a few minutes, all of them fall away.

Jinsol smiles a very teary smile. Choerry doesn’t break their gaze.

“I missed you more than you know,” Jinsol breathes with a smile. “And I’m so sorry I missed so much,” she begins to cry in actuality, now. “One day you were so little and the next,” she shakes her head. “I don’t know,” Jinsol chokes on her tears. “And the aquarium, it just got so big and-”

Jinsol cries a bit.

“And so did you,” she says guiltily, while Choerry grabs her mother’s hand. “And I’m *sorry* I missed out on it for so long.”

“It’s okay,” Choerry responds softly, honestly.

They’ll never truly make up for the lost time, her and her mother. But Choerry feels so perfect here with Jinsol, that what’s done is done. That perhaps every single moment in the chain of events led

to this very feeling of such understanding, such serenity.

Choerry smiles. "I love you for doing the hard thing for me." Choerry whispers, making Jinsol cry. The eighth grader leans in, and hugs her with all she has.

Jungeun meets them outside the ice rink, in the parking lot. She drove over straight from her meeting as fast as she could.

"Oh Choerry," she exclaims at the sight of her daughter in her dirty white dress and tear-stained, runny makeup. "What happened?" she asks gently, despite Jinsol having already let her know.

Choerry, of course, loses every bit of strength she had and runs into Jungeun's arms, crying all over again. Her shorter mother holds her tight, while noticing Jinsol lacks any arm covering because Choerry is wrapped in her blazer.

While Choerry stays in Jungeun's arms, Jungeun reaches out to hold her wife's hand, giving her a soft smile as if to thank her. Jinsol squeezes her hand in response.

"Come on," Jungeun says. "Let's go home."

Choerry is comfortable under her purple, astro-themed duvet, as Jungeun and Jinsol have refused to leave her alone. Her mothers sit at the foot at her left side of the bed.

"Are you sure you don't want us to sleep with you tonight? Because we can," Jungeun says.

"Mom, I'm almost fourteen," Choerry sighs.

"I don't care," Jungeun counters playfully. "You're always gonna be our baby," she says, and Choerry can't help but smile. Her eyes are heavy from the tears of today.

"I might as well still be one because all I do is cry," and Jungeun and Jinsol hurt at the words of their happy little girl.

"Sweetie," Jungeun starts softly. "A lot of enormously big things have happened for you this year," she says, referring to Choerry's presidency, friendships, anxiety, and heartbreak. "And... As much as we both hate it, you're growing up. And growing up is a lot of changes, and it's always okay to cry."

Choerry smiles at her mothers, wondering how she got so lucky to have them. She makes a mental note for far into the future, to remember to treat her own children the way her mothers have loved her.

Jinsol squeezes their daughter's hand. "I'm gonna get you a water bottle okay, I'll be right back." The CEO gets up to leave, leaving Jungeun and Choerry in the dimly lit bedroom.

"Are you sure you're gonna be okay," Jungeun asks, just one more time. Choerry nods again. Jinsol and Choerry will always be best friends, but Jungeun and Choerry have been through thick and thin, early morning Starbucks trips, late night dinners, everything in between. Their bond will always be special.

“You know we love you so much, right?”

“Yeah,” Choerry confirms softly with an exhausted smile.

Jungeun leans over carefully and plants a kiss on her forehead, because she just can’t say she loves her enough. Just then, Jinsol comes back in with water, setting it on the table.

Choerry sleeps that night thinking about how loved she is. She has Yeojin, who defended her, who came with her to the fields. Yeri, who sees her as her equal in performance (Well sort of). Chaewon, who, always hyped her up!

And Olivia. It makes her feel slightly nauseous thinking about how Olivia was mad at her. But Choerry hopes with every fiber of her being that she would realize how sorry she was, and that she would come back around. She would make sure of it, even if it meant apologizing every day if she had to.

Hyejoo said nothing the entire ride home.

Sooyoung watches Hyejoo as the eighth grader irritably takes off her heels, nearly throwing them to the floor with such force for such a small child.

“Is something wrong.” Sooyoung asks coldly, her voice echoing through the dark chambers of their home.

Hyejoo mutters something under her breath.

“What?” her mother snaps.

“I said what the *fuck isn’t wrong*.” Hyejoo growls at her.

Sooyoung’s eyes widen at the animosity. She knows her daughter is right, but that doesn’t mean she’ll let that one fly.

“*Watch your tone*.” Sooyoung orders harshly.

“Oh like you did?” Hyejoo says softly, but still within earshot as she glares at Sooyoung with enough hatred to kill. “When you yelled at Mom in the kitchen?”

Sooyoung gasps sharply. “You could hear me?” Sooyoung is speaking so softly that it’s nearly a whisper, still suspended in horror of her own actions. This only makes them millions of leagues worse.

Hyejoo lets out an angry, hollow laugh unfit for someone so young.

“Of *course* I heard it,” she snaps. “I heard every bitter word you said about her, about *me*. But I deserved that right? Because it’s *my* fault?! And now it’s *my fault* Mom is gone.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.” Sooyoung suddenly backtracks.

“I’M NOT BECAUSE *THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT YOU SAID!*” Hyejoo screams nastily at her mother, the loudest she’s ever screamed in her life. “AND YOU CALLED HER *STUPID!*” her voice cracks with pain.

Sooyoung begins to panic. “Hyejoo-”

“DO YOU THINK I WANTED ANY OF THIS? DO YOU THINK I WANTED MOM GONE? I LOVE HER!” Hyejoo yells at her lousy excuse of a mother. “DO YOU THINK ANY OF WHAT I SAID UP THERE WAS FOR HER? **IT WAS FOR YOU!**”

The CEO has to stop herself from trembling, feeling all the warmth for her daughter that’s ever found a home in her body exit in that very moment. They were nothing, now.

“You wouldn’t know the *slightest* thing about what I want you *FUCKING BITCH!*” Hyejoo spits, nearly stumbling over a sob.

Hyejoo is surprised when she sees Sooyoung’s face after the hellish use of profanity. Her mother’s face is not angered, nor apologetic. In the span of less than a week, Sooyoung’s very soul itself was sucked from inside of her. Her hooded, insomniac eyes look like not a single thing is behind them.

Hyejoo doesn’t know what to say as they stare at each other. The eighth grader breathes heavily as her anguished gaze meets her mother’s.

These two have very few memories together, truth be told. But Hyejoo still feels them now, when she looks at Sooyoung - minute, scattered frames of memories that Hyejoo can almost smell, how differently her mother was with her, the ones that Sooyoung had simply decided to discard somewhere along the line.

“I just wanted *you*.” Hyejoo breathes softly, unable to keep her eyes open as she squints the tears down her face. “Was that too much to ask?”

Sooyoung’s eyes sharpen, some remnants of life swimming back into them again. “You never saw me as your mother in the first place,” Sooyoung rasps bitterly.

Hyejoo nearly gasps. “What...?”

Sooyoung turns around and begins to walk away. “*Forget it.*”

“No- What-”

“*I don’t want to talk to you,*” Sooyoung says with such petty contempt it slashes across Hyejoo’s heart. “*Get out* of my sight.”

“*No.*”

“HYEJOO!” Sooyoung turns around and yells.

“*NO!*” Hyejoo cries. “TELL ME!”

Sooyoung stops walking, and turns around to see her daughter come closer.

“I want to know,” the eighth grader pleads. “When you decided you weren’t gonna care about me.” She has no idea why, but at this point, when she’s lost everyone, she demands to know.

Sooyoung’s jaw is locked under the darkness, barely lit by the chandelier.

“*TELL ME!*”

“*BECAUSE YOU CRIED!*” Sooyoung erupts with so much searing emotion - misery, hatred, everything in between. “*AS A BABY!*”

Hyejoo's jaw drops. "Because I *cried as a baby*?!!?!" She can't believe her ears, feels like this is all one big joke.

But it can't be - because Sooyoung is sobbing, hard.

It's only the second time in her life that Hyejoo has seen the most sophisticated, composed woman in the world cry.

"You were c-crying," Sooyoung weeps, like every thick, expensive layer she has to her composure has finally weathered off. "Every time I tried to pick you up- Every time I tried," she recalls agonizingly, "You *never* wanted me to. You never wanted me like you wanted Jiwoo, and it was always like I was *wrong*."

Hyejoo cannot help but feel horrible now, like her entire world has turned itself inside out.

"A-And," Sooyoung cries violently into her hands, her tortured face glistening in the faint light, "You kept asking for your mommy," she laments, looking at Hyejoo. "I *am* your mommy," she cries, and it's the saddest plea Hyejoo's ever heard.

Hyejoo stares at her broken mother in horror.

"I was a baby," she says guiltily, with so much sadness Hyejoo feels like she won't ever escape it.

"I'm so-, I- I was a baby," Hyejoo is frozen, and full of confusion.

Then, anger.

"You hate me for the way I acted as a *baby*?" Hyejoo asks in sheer disbelief.

Sooyoung finally looks at her only child crying in front of her, realizing now how horrible this all was.

"I didn't even do it on *purpose*," Hyejoo cries. "I couldn't even SPEAK SENTENCES."

Sooyoung looks at her regretfully, on the cusp of an apology.

But soon enough, her daughter's eyes are daggers at her mother once more. "You're *sick*. You're crazy," Hyejoo growls once more at her. "It's *not* fair to me. I deserve better than you," she knows that, if not anything else.

"Hyejoo," Sooyoung starts voicelessly with those lifeless, tired eyes.

"Get some fucking help," Hyejoo snaps viciously at a shattered Sooyoung.

Sooyoung just looks at her. "I'm so sorry, Hyejoo." her mother whispers.

Hyejoo glares at her with everything she has.

"I *don't* forgive you." Hyejoo rejects harshly. "I *hate* you."

PLEASE FEAST ON THE CHUUVES BACKSTORY, NEWLY PUBLISHED AS
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Spring Break

Chapter Notes

Over 100,000 views. Thank you.

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just for fun! listen in order! play the song on repeat and skip at the *** scene dividers
:)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sooyoung Ha: Jiwoo

Sooyoung Ha: Please

Sooyoung Ha: I can't go another day like this. Please say something

Sooyoung Ha: Anything at all. I'm begging you.

Sooyoung Ha: I know I've upset you, and hurt your feelings badly. I cannot even begin to tell you how sorry I am for lashing out. I need you to know there is not a moment that goes by that I am not regretful. I didn't mean a word of what I shouted at you, and I am so, so sorry Jiwoo. I promise you that I would never hurt you on purpose. I'm sorry that my anger got out of hand.

You are the best thing that has ever come into my life. Every year we grow older together I find myself falling deeper in love with you, when I didn't even believe such a thing would be possible. I have no idea what came over me, but apologizing hardly feels adequate. I wou...

(CHARACTER LIMIT, SEE MORE →)

Sooyoung Ha: Please just tell me how you feel.

Sooyoung Ha: Honey, I can't find the remote

Sooyoung Ha: Ok, I was lying. I just thought maybe you'd respond.

Sooyoung Ha: Jiwooming

Sooyoung Ha: I don't think I can do it without you

Sooyoung Ha: Please

Sooyoung Ha: At least tell me where you are. I just want to know that you are safe and sound.

Sooyoung Ha: I know you are seeing our daughter. Please just tell me where you are. You don't need to be sending Eunseo here.

Sooyoung Ha: Please just come home.

Tzuyu Chou, MFT is the most expensive and renowned therapist in the entirety of the Beverly Hills social sphere. Naturally, that is the only option Sooyoung Ha would ever consider for herself should she stoop so low as to require professional help.

Well, it seems that she *has*. Per her daughter's tearful, angry demands, Sooyoung has made her first ever therapy appointment.

She didn't tell a soul, of course. Why would she? It's not exactly something Sooyoung would plaster at the top of her portfolio.

The rain pitter-patters against the large windows while the marriage & family therapist fills out the new patient paperwork with an emotionless expression. Sooyoung's eyes judge the interior design of the office. It's minimalistic, yet somehow cozy by design... but Sooyoung can't *stand* that there are so many plush couches. As if she would be comfortable enough to recline, spread eagle, in front of this complete and utter stranger.

Tzuyu notices Sooyoung's uncomfortable surveying of the space, like a desert viper dropped in the middle of the arctic. "Would you like anything, Ms. Ha?"

Miss, Sooyoung registers with the most *searing* contempt.

Sooyoung hates the absence of her marital status in the prefix, and therefore decides to hate Tzuyu for it too.

"No, thank you."

The sounds of the rain and Tzuyu's ballpen are the only sounds in the spacious office. Sooyoung decides to focus on the former, following a singular raindrop cascading down, down to its disintegrating demise against the windowsill.

Jiwoo had always loved the rain, cheering wonderfully every rare morning it came. She would dance in it, shamelessly, laughing and playing with the fearlessness of a child.

It's been a week since she's left.

"Ms. Ha," Tzuyu says again, finally finishing up her preliminary notes. "Whenever you're ready, I would like to hear about why you've chosen to come in today."

Sooyoung looks directly at the younger woman, who (to her surprise) does not shy away from her piercing eye contact in the slightest.

The richest woman in the world continues to stare while she feels her mouth suddenly become dry.

“...I don’t know,” Sooyoung declares flatly.

“Well,” Tzuyu hums, rustling through some paperwork, “Your daughter yelled at you?”

“How do you know that?” Sooyoung snaps venomously, feeling exposed.

Tzuyu stares calmly, unafraid. “It says right here, Ms. Ha. On the intake questionnaire you completed online when you booked this appointment.” The therapist looks down at the printed form, at the time-stamp reading **3:07 AM**. “You wrote this. Under the question ‘*What are you seeking therapy for?*’ It actually reads ‘daughter yekked at me’, but I am going to assume that was a typo. Along with the other places where you misspelled your own name.”

Sooyoung stiffens in embarrassment. She *was* crying quite hard, after all. The screen was blurry.

“Yes,” the CEO confirms. *Well, this is humbling.* “My daughter yelled at me.”

“And why did she do that?” Tzuyu asks, still staring.

Sooyoung feels like she is a circus animal being prodded with a stick.

She looks around the room as if the wallpaper would give her the correct answer. “She is unhappy.”

Tzuyu relaxes into her chair. “And what is causing her to act that way?”

“You’re awfully nosy,” Sooyoung quips without skipping a beat.

Tzuyu pauses with a blank stare and sighs.

“I think for this to work, you’re going to need to cooperate with me.”

Sooyoung is shocked by Tzuyu’s dauntlessness. She can’t even remember the last time anyone other than Hyejoo has been so openly defiant towards her. Tzuyu still hasn’t even broken eye contact with the billionaire, who has been effectively rendered speechless.

Tzuyu looks down at her clipboard once more, clicking her pen and moving on. “Why don’t you tell me about yourself.” Tzuyu offers. “Do you have any siblings?”

“No.”

“Okay, did you live with your mother and father?”

Tzuyu notices Sooyoung stiffen slightly, and keeps it in mind.

“Yes. In South Korea for a time. Until I went to Harvard for my business degrees. Now I’m here.” Sooyoung says, cherry-picking her words. Sooyoung expects a typical kiss-up compliment about her alma mater, but Tzuyu looks unfazed, irking Sooyoung to her core once again.

“Are you married?”

Do you live under a rock? Sooyoung’s eyes narrow. Just a few months ago, the Ha mothers donned yet another cover of Time Magazine. “Yes.”

“And you have how many children.”

“One.” Sooyoung’s gaze averts again to the rain on the window. “Just the one.”

“How old is she?”

Sooyoung pauses.

...She doesn't really know.

Tzuyu stares at her, waiting for a response, but Sooyoung is scrambling to do the mental math. “Fourteen,” she finally supplies. “No- My mistake. Thirteen.”

“...Are you two... close?”

Sooyoung averts her eyes to the other furniture in the room with an awkward cringe. “Define... close.”

“Do you spend quality time together,” Tzuyu says with her signature blank expression. “Do you regularly have one-on-one conversations that amount to a net positive, and on average last longer than a minute.”

“No.”

“How would you describe your relationship then?”

Sooyoung shrugs. “Standard.”

Tzuyu is unconvinced.

“How about your marriage?”

“Very good,” Sooyoung answers immediately. “We are very... happy.”

“Any problems in the past with money, infidelity, substance abuse, gambling-”

“No.”

“Alright,” Tzuyu scribbles a few more notes. “And how is your relationship with your parents.”

Sooyoung laughs crookedly. “I don't think we have time for that,” she chuckles.

The therapist is still looking at her expectantly.

“Write down ‘bad’,” Sooyoung supplies.

“...Would you like to elaborate?”

“Very bad.”

Tzuyu shuffles through paperwork to find a separate questionnaire. “I'm going to read out a list of things, and please answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ if you've experienced these things in your household as a child.”

Sooyoung glares. “I don't feel comfortable with answering those questions.”

“Ms. Ha-”

There she goes again.

“Although what you elect to share with me is voluntary and confidential, this information is quite crucial.” Tzuyu stares at Sooyoung, who shifts uncomfortably. “How about this. I am going to hand you my clipboard and you can check off the items yourself.”

Sooyoung nods, then retrieves the clipboard from Tzuyu’s extended arm. Seconds pass as her eyes gloss over all the options, then she reluctantly begins to make consecutive check marks.

When Sooyoung hands the clipboard back to her, Tzuyu eyes the checklist concernedly.

☒ **Verbal Abuse**

☒ **Emotional Abuse**

☒ **Recurring or total absence of guardian(s)**

☒ **Physical Punishments**

☐ **Substance Abuse**

☒ **Financial Hardship**

☒ **Rejection of one or more personal identities (Ex. - Sexual orientation, gender)**

☒ **Domestic Violence**

“Are you going to lock me up now?” Sooyoung asks sarcastically, despite it having a sliver of true fear of her own self behind it.

“That’s not how therapy works, Ms. Ha.” Tzuyu answers. “Have you ever seen a therapist before?”

“No.”

“Do you have any documented mental illnesses?”

“No, I’m invincible,” Sooyoung deadpans with a wry smile yet again, attempting at coping with humor. It all looks sickly with her despondent, sullen eyes.

Tzuyu stares back at her, completely unamused.

“Erm. No.” Sooyoung says, while Tzuyu continues to stare. “Write ‘No’.”

“...What, in general, brought you to therapy?” Tzuyu asks, sitting back and studying Sooyoung’s uneasy demeanor. “What do you feel is wrong in your life?”

Sooyoung takes a moment, and Tzuyu almost thinks she’s not going to respond.

Sooyoung has no idea how to say it.

“In addition to my daughter yelling at me... I have not been sleeping.” Sooyoung declares. “I have recurring nightmares since I was a child that are beginning to increase in frequency.”

“...Did something happen?”

“My wife is gone and my child despises me.”

“And why is that?”

“...Apparently I am not a good mother.”

Tzuyu pauses, noting the remorse in Sooyoung’s eyes, then nods carefully.

“I’m not *abusive*, or anything-”

“So you *are* having marital issues, as well.” Tzuyu interjects. (After all, she’ll be the one to judge if her client’s been abusive.)

The CEO flares. “Wouldn’t *you* like to know!”

“...Yes, that’s my job.” Tzuyu answers calmly.

Sooyoung scoffs, face red once more.

“Any history of self-harm? Or thoughts of suicide?” Tzuyu asks while coming to the end of her form.

“I’m the richest woman in the world. Why would I want to kill myself.”

Tzuyu takes a deep breath, realizing she will have to take a much stricter approach to the CEO than she does to any of her patients. She perks an eyebrow and scribbles notes across her paper, mumbling “...*Equates material wealth with happiness.*”

The CEO blinks, then squints pointedly. “Well am I wrong?”

“*Much deeper issues concerning this...*” Tzuyu murmurs while still jotting her words down, noticing a change in Sooyoung’s behavior already.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be saying all of this outloud!”

“*Control... issues,*” the therapist adds coolly. Sooyoung glares at Tzuyu’s spot-on perceptivity in horror.

“Stop!”

“And your daughter,” Tzuyu asks again, mending their eye contact. “Did she tell you outright that she thinks you’re a bad mother?”

“She told the *world*,” Sooyoung snaps. “She won a poetry contest for school where she read aloud how miserable she was with her life. Embarrassing us in front of everyone. *Dear Mom,*” she mocks sourly.

Tzuyu’s eyes narrow in intrigue at the woman finally releasing more than short statements.

“Sounds like she was crying for help.” Sooyoung just stares back at her with a frown. “What did she say in the poem exactly?”

“Oh I don’t know. She was saying she never asked to be born. That she hates her home. That I hate her. That it’s hard to get up.” Sooyoung recounts with a bite, but can’t help but feel increasingly sad.

The therapist looks at her in silence, apprehensive of how to proceed with this situation.

“This doesn’t concern you...?” Tzuyu asks.

“I didn’t ask to be born either, but here I am,” Sooyoung snaps bitterly. “You don’t think I hated my home at that age too? That it was hard to get up too? Of course I did! And yet I never *dared* to disrespect my parents that way.”

Tzuyu scribbles some more notes, and Sooyoung irrationally just wants to rip the notebook out of her hands.

The therapist takes a careful breath. “How would you describe your daughter?”

“She’s... Just...” Sooyoung cringes like she doesn’t know what to say. “Kind of goth looking. Well- not really, just dresses very plain. Always black. Doesn’t smile. She’s always kept to herself. School has always been easy for her, but she’s very reserved.” It stings when Sooyoung realizes just how much the description is beginning to sound like her.

“Does she have friends?”

“Yes, I think... a little group of misfits, and a girl she likes... But... She’s always sad looking, angry, or flat. Those are her three moods. My wife doesn’t even seem to cheer her up, and she cheers everyone up. For a while now she’s been refusing to go by her real name. Her name is Hyejoo but she insists that everyone at school call her Olivia. I don’t know where she got that from.”

“Olivia?”

Sooyoung nods.

“She is rejecting the identity you gave her,” Tzuyu mumbles, while jotting down more notes.

Sooyoung had already figured that, but hearing it just makes it hurt.

“She’s been... acting out this year.”

“In what way?”

“She was suspended from school for being physically violent.” Sooyoung says, ironically, considering that the same thing had happened to the milf back in the fall. “Oh. That’s right, Hyejoo also snuck out to attend a high school party.”

Tzuyu twirls the ballpen between her fingers, analyzing the look of nothingness of Sooyoung’s face. “Did any significant change happen for your family before this started? Perhaps the death of a pet, or...?”

“No, not really.” Sooyoung glosses over the past school year so far in her brain. “Oh. Well I suppose I joined the PTA. My wife told me to spend more time with her. That’s when... most of this started...” Sooyoung trails off, the gears turning in her brain.

“Ms. Ha, I don’t think it’s too far of a stretch to assume that your daughter is struggling with some form of depression.”

Sooyoung huffs. “Oh great, so now I’ve made my daughter depressed?”

“Possibly,” Tzuyu answers.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a possibility that you have led to the worsening of your daughter’s mental health.”

“And how is that supposed to make me feel.” Sooyoung snaps.

“Sad,” Tzuyu states plainly.

Check, Sooyoung thinks to herself.

“But determined. To help her, and change something about the way you go about your relationship with her.”

Sooyoung stops talking altogether again, eyes trained to the window.

It’s too foreign to fathom.

“And how about you?” Tzuyu continues. “Do you have any history of mental illness in your family?”

“According to them, being gay,” Sooyoung deadpans with a frown. “...I don’t know. They’re insane. So, probably.”

Tzuyu takes a mental note to figure out what ‘insane’ means later. But homophobia definitely sounds like the word may not be too far off. “And on your wife’s side?”

“Not that I know of.”

“How’s your wife?” Tzuyu inquires, while jotting down notes on her page. “*Chuu*, isn’t it? Jiwoo Ha? I’ve seen her in the tabloids.”

“Yes,” Sooyoung affirms hastily, as if jumping at any opportunity to reseal the cracks in their union. “Jiwoo.”

“How is she with you, generally?”

“Happy,” Sooyoung repeats. “She is... jovial. Always very bright,” she hums. “Very nurturing. Mothering has always been very natural for her, unlike myself,” Sooyoung pauses, then grows quiet. “She is the kindest person I have ever met.”

Tzuyu analyzes her notes so far. Sooyoung Ha and her daughter, being solely buoyed by the unwavering strength of Jiwoo Ha’s light. Jiwoo Ha being Sooyoung Ha’s antidepressant.

Quite the interesting case indeed. If Tzuyu were being completely transparent, her intuition is telling her all three of them should be in therapy. Their daughter for depression and anger issues, Sooyoung for her childhood trauma at the very least, and Jiwoo for the emotional burden of having to keep them all afloat.

“And where is she now?” Tzuyu’s question stings the CEO right where it hurts.

“I don’t know,” Sooyoung answers after a pregnant pause. “She was upset with me about Hyejoo’s poem. And then I- Well.” Sooyoung looks away. “I said... things to her.”

“What did you say to her?” Tzuyu prods relentlessly.

Sooyoung bites the inside of her cheek so hard it begins to bleed. “I said very mean things to her

about things she is insecure about.” Tzuyu pauses purposely, letting Sooyoung know she isn’t satisfied with that answer. “I was angry at Hyejoo for the poem, and Jiwoo was angry at me. She told me I haven’t done one good thing for this family.” Sooyoung takes a sharp intake of breath. “...And then I...”

Tzuyu stares expectantly, unfazed.

“Well, I shouted at her. I *did not* mean it. It just came out,” Sooyoung confesses awkwardly, then looks down at the floor. “I called her dumb and... stupid and I insulted her.” Sooyoung’s voice falters now from how difficult it is to get her words across. “I didn’t mean to,” she repeats, quietly. Sincerely.

Tzuyu draws a line to connect Hyejoo and Sooyoung’s names on her notepad, hastily scribbling *temper* above it.

“You know, using your wife’s insecurities against her in such a manner could be considered verbally abusive if done on multiple occasions. Have you ever said things like this before?”

“Excuse me?” Sooyoung snaps. “*Verbal abuse?* You are far out of line. I did not - ”

“You belittled her,” Tzuyu cuts her off. “Shouted at her. You berated your wife for her characteristics you are aware she is insecure of in a manipulative manner... I am simply making you aware that if this has happened on multiple occasions, you could be dealing with a larger issue.”

Sooyoung feels like a million daggers have risen to point directly at her face.

Overwhelmed, she submerges her face in her hands.

Tzuyu watches analytically as Sooyoung appears to cry silently in front of her. The therapist says nothing. The rainfall outside overpowers Sooyoung’s soft sobs.

“I love Jiwoo more than anything,” Sooyoung says into her hands.

“...More than your daughter?” Tzuyu asks directly. She’s decided firmly that the best remedy for arrogance is one without mercy. “Have you ever considered that perhaps, the verbal abuse may not apply to just your wife?”

Sooyoung wavers for a moment. She may have only had one outburst against Jiwoo, but she can’t even count the amount of outburst she’s had towards Hyejoo.

The CEO’s head rises up to look at the therapist with angry eyes. She’s sick of feeling even worse with every word that comes out of this therapist’s mouth. “Shut up.” Sooyoung seethes. “I *love* my daughter. And I am paying you to tell me what I need to do to fix this,” her authoritative voice cracks like a whip. “If you can’t do that for me then I think I can end your career for malpractice and take my business *elsewhere*.”

“You misunderstand therapy, Ms. Ha,” Tzuyu deflects. She has a calm, unafraid look on her face. “We discuss what bothers you, and I help you see things from different perspectives. But I do not tell you what to do.”

“And why *not*.”

“Because you need to make those choices on your own.”

Night has already fallen when Jinsol Kim walks down her spiral staircase, illuminated by the aquatic glow of the fish tank it encircles. It's just two measly hours before midnight, and the CEO is surprised to see both her wife and daughter awake at this hour.

Jungeun types away at her MacBook on the couch, doing some low-maintenance work outside of her home office. Choerry is sitting on the adjacent white couch, typing away at her own laptop as well with a blanket over her legs. The two sit comfortably as the ocean's dark horizon can be seen through the glass wall.

"It's past your bedtime, missy," Jinsol hums as she pads past her daughter. "What are you still doing down here?"

"Nothing," Choerry answers quickly. On her screen is yet another frantic Google search. Her recent search history includes:

how to apologize to a friend after you told their crush they like them but it was super obvious the whole time and everyone knew

how to make an unhappy person happy

am i a bad person if i made my friend sad

best way to do something nice for someone who hates you

how to send edible arrangement without a credit card

how to get someone to like my friend back

science behind friends fighting

how to cure depression

The eighth grader's eyebrows knit together in frustration. Choerry had been trying to reach out to Hyejoo for days now, but to no avail. Hyejoo was completely ignoring every text and call - not only from her, but from Yeojin, Yeri, and most surprisingly Chaewon.

Jinsol takes a seat next to her wife on the couch as Jungeun twirls a pen around her fingers. "Still busy?" she asks gently as bright financial models reflect in Jungeun's calculating eyes. Jungeun nods. The CFO still has her tight ponytail in from work, and hasn't changed clothes either.

Jinsol knows asking her wife to take a break is futile most of the time. Still though, she carefully undoes the ponytail in her wife's hair while Jungeun hums in gratitude. Choerry glances at the sweet act of service with a smile, but her heart pangs a little with loneliness.

Chad hasn't even *tried* to text her since Spring Fling.

Choerry knows she shouldn't, but she just wants him to apologize, so she can forgive him and their relationship can return to how it was.

She *had* blocked him on every social media, of course (just like her mothers and friends suggested). But still! He could have emailed her through her St. Jihyo's school email!

But there are more pressing matters at hand, Choerry thinks to herself. The pink-haired eighth

grader gets back to her Googling.

Jinsol massages her wife's scalp with a gentle hand as Jungeun leans into her touch with closed eyes. "Come to bed already," the CEO says.

"I'm almost done," Jungeun insists stubbornly.

"You said that an hour ago," Jinsol whispers with warm eyes. Jungeun looks away from her screen to make eye contact with her wife. Jinsol tucks some light brown hair away from her eyes. "Come on," Jinsol says, then looks at their daughter. "You too baby. Get to bed."

"Five minutes," Choerry says.

"Me too," Jungeun adds, making Jinsol pout. "Five minutes," she repeats.

Just then, the home phone rings from the kitchen. "Saved by the bell," Jinsol sighs. "Five minutes."

The CEO walks on over to the dark antechamber, following the ring. Anyone who is calling them on this line late at night must be someone who knows them personally, yet the number is not one Jinsol recognizes.

The screen of the handheld phone reads **BEVERLY HILLS, CA** directly under the phone number.

"Hello," Jinsol answers with a pleasant tone.

"*What do you want,*" the familiar voice of none other than Sooyoung Ha snaps into the phone line.

"Wh—" Jinsol fumes defensively, instantly recognizing her voice. "You called me! This is my house!"

"*Where is Jiwoo.*" Sooyoung asks forcefully. Jinsol can't help but notice the stuffiness in Sooyoung's voice. Either the fashion empress has caught a bad cold, or she's just been crying. "*Is Jiwoo there.*"

Jinsol narrows her eyes defensively. "If she wanted you to know her whereabouts she would have told you," she snaps, remembering how she's never seen Jiwoo so hurt. The celebrity had left their home already, retreating to a Hollywood hotel near her film set. Jinsol has no idea what Sooyoung did to her, but it must have been horrible if her wife still hasn't returned home or even made contact.

"*Jinsol, please,*" Sooyoung says in desperation Jinsol has never heard before. "*I need to know if Jiwoo is okay. Get Jungeun on the phone.*"

"YOU'RE NOT TALKING TO JUNGEUN!" Jinsol yelps, her voice involuntarily raising to yelling volume. Right then and there, Jungeun approaches, prying the home phone from Jinsol's hands as she pouts.

"Who is this?" Jungeun asks.

"*Jungeun. Please tell me where Jiwoo is.*" Sooyoung pleads while Jungeun fills with rage.

"You have a lot of nerve calling me, Sooyoung," Jungeun bites. "After yelling at her that way."

Jinsol widens her eyes despite only being able to hear Jungeun's side of the conversation.

"Jungeun, please," Sooyoung whispers into the line. *"I didn't mean it- She just hasn't been answering any of my calls and I'm concer-"*

"She's *fine*," Jungeun snaps, while Sooyoung feels like someone just socked her in the stomach. "Don't call this number again unless it's an emergency." Jungeun orders. "If Jiwoo wanted to talk to you she would have reached out herself."

Jungeun almost feels bad when she hears Sooyoung seemingly fail to hold in a soft sob. *"Please, Jungeun, just tell her I'm sorry-"*

"Goodbye Sooyoung," Jungeun cuts, then puts down the home phone before waiting for a response.

She sighs in frustration while Jinsol looks at her with wide eyes. "I should have recorded that," Jinsol whispers, sounding a little too excited.

Jungeun smiles at her, satisfied with herself, then stares back down at the home phone with apprehension.

"This is bad," the CFO whispers, as if scared to admit it.

Jungeun sighs again, then walks back over with Jinsol to get their daughter to bed.

The next morning of spring break, the Kim family decides to spend a day on the water. Choerry has been noticeably stressed, so her mothers put together an impromptu picnic basket and charcuterie. They woke at sunrise to mount their smallest boat, a compact but luxurious white cabin cruiser, docked on the private beach below their home.

Jungeun watches her wife and daughter now from the edge of the boat with a smile. Jinsol is teaching Choerry how to swim, finishing the lessons they started years ago. They have been out for hours now, with the sun shining from high in the sky as if smiling at the family.

Choerry had been awfully afraid of some shark, giant squid, or the Loch Ness Monster (coming all the way from Scotland to Palos Verdes somehow) swallowing them whole from beneath her. The child has had this fear for as long as she could remember, even if she was just in a swimming pool where her feet couldn't touch the floor.

But by now Choerry knows that it is just another manifestation of her anxiety, and is able to calm herself down enough whenever stray kelp brushes against her legs. Jinsol had put her worries to bed hours ago by reassuring her that it would be virtually impossible for any marine life within miles to be predatory.

She smiles warmly for the millionth time today as Choerry successfully swims a distance.

Speaking of the CEO, after the night of the St. Jihyo's Spring Fling dance, Jinsol had decided to redesign the divisions of power within the Aquarium of the Pacific. She had worked her hardest to get the establishment to the fame it has now; she would rather delegate to spend more time with her beloved wife and daughter than push it to even more growth for the time being.

She looks up to Jungeun, who has been sitting at the edge of the boat with her legs in the water. The CFO has a towel wrapped around her comfortably. She swam with them earlier, but by now

was dried off setting up their brunch picnic peacefully. Jungeun meets her wife's eyes with a smile. "What are you looking at," she asks playfully while crinkling her nose. The sea water still glistens off her tanned skin.

Jungeun has bright eyes as she admires the love of her life shining in the blue sea. "My beautiful wife," Jinsol says shyly, while Choerry is swimming back toward her.

"Don't make me jump in there and kiss you," Jungeun says lovingly with a blush on her glowing face.

Before Jinsol can reply, Choerry rises from the water in a coughing fit. Her mother in the water immediately holds her for support as Choerry coughs, while Jungeun watches worriedly.

"I'm okay," Choerry croaks out through coughs. Then some more. "Salty."

"Are you lifting your head up to breathe?" Jungeun asks from the edge of the boat. (She was a star swimmer in college, after all, and could have gone to the Olympics if she chose to.)

"No I don't like doing that," Choerry doggy paddles to tread water while Jinsol moves wet hair out of her eyes. "I just like holding my breath for as long as I can."

"That's not good technique," Jungeun advises. "Your muscles get too stiff because your body isn't getting enough oxygen."

"And it's the carbon dioxide building up in your lungs that needs to come out," Jinsol supplements. "You have to blow your bubbles, and tilt your head..." she continues, instructing Choerry as their eighth grader pouts.

Jungeun watches them endearingly as she looks up at their home atop the promontory, the same home they had when Jungeun rode this boat out with Jinsol on starry nights as newlyweds, the same shore where she watched Choerry take her first steps. It feels like just yesterday when she and Jinsol built sandcastles and picked seashells with their baby, Jinsol panicking when Choerry stumbled face-first in the sand but came up laughing.

Jungeun closes her eyes to revel in the memories, then turns to make the finishing touches on their picnic.

When Jinsol and Choerry finally decide to swim back up to the deck, Jungeun has their fluffy beach towels waiting for them. Her wife and little girl climb up the aft ladder, dripping while Jungeun envelops the both of them to dry them off.

Jinsol pecks Jungeun on the lips with a smile before sitting at the side of the boat around the fancy spread for lunch. French bread, expensive cheese, and assorted fruits rest in between them. Choerry joins Jinsol at her side.

"Thank you Mommy," she says, ever polite, and unable to hide her excitement as she reaches for a cut of the fancy baguette.

"Thank you sweetheart," Jinsol smiles at her wife opposite of them.

Jungeun hums, blissfully biting into a sweet strawberry. They dig in together, hungry from the time spent playing in the ocean.

"Choerry, it's your Spring Break," Jungeun starts with a hand over her mouth as she finishes up another fruit. "Do you have any plans to hang out with your friends?"

Choerry is silent as she scoops more strawberry puree into her glass and pours in the lemonade. “No, Chad and I aren’t together anymore,” she remarks sourly while avoiding eye contact.

“I meant your *friends* friends sweetie, not that loser,” Jungeun says calmly. “Like Yeojin and the girls!”

“I dunno, maybe Yeojin or something,” Choerry chirps. “But Olivia is still mad at me, so I don’t think we’re all gonna hang out...”

“Why is she mad at you?” Jinsol asks in alarm.

“Well...” Choerry tilts her glass up to drink, clearly avoiding the question because her cup is completely empty. Her mothers eye her suspiciously. “Well at the dance- She, um... She, like- Well, She screamed at me and said a lot of like mean things,” Choerry stumbles over her words as she nervously looks down at the little jars of exquisite jams. “But I kinda get why she’s mad, but I was just trying to help by telling Chaewon that she likes her-”

Jinsol’s eyes widen, and Jungeun looks at their daughter in disbelief with her mouth slightly agape. “You what?”

“Choerry!” Jinsol softly chides.

“What!”

“Why would you say that?!” Jungeun asks. “That isn’t your secret to tell!”

“You really shouldn’t do that to people Choerry,” Jinsol says at her side.

Choerry proceeds to wrap herself tightly in her beach towel in shame. She looks like a nun.

“I was just trying to help them,” Choerry says defensively. “You don’t even know how they act, it’s so obvious already and- and- Yeojin talks about it, Yeri talks about it, everyone knows and I wanted to make Olivia happier-”

“That still was not your secret to tell,” Jungeun repeats sternly over the sound of the waves undulating around them.

“It feels like you’re yelling at me,” Choerry says quietly into the fluff of her towel. “I didn’t mean it.”

“We’re not yelling at you baby,” Jinsol says gently, her heart softening while Jungeun still has that distressed look on her face. “You just really can’t do that.”

“Well she called me stupid, so...” the eighth grader grumbles, biting into a watermelon anxiously.

Jungeun sighs. “I’m sure Hyejoo didn’t mean it. It doesn’t excuse her actions, but she *is* going through a very hard time right now,” Jungeun laments quietly.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Choerry asks, immediately tensing up. “Are Auntie Sooyoung and Auntie Jiwoo getting a divorce?”

Jungeun opens her mouth to answer, but nothing comes out. After all, Jiwoo had barely been talking to her about the situation either.

Jinsol stays silent also, feeling horrible for Hyejoo and Jiwoo.

“...I hope not,” Jungeun replies delicately.

“That’s not our business,” Jinsol adds. “All you can do is listen and support her.”

“I tried to say sorry over text! I even called her but she never responds..”

“Then give her space.” Jinsol commands. “That’s what she wants.”

Choerry pouts, then saddens at the thought. Hyejoo’s mothers always seemed like a very happy couple. From the few times Choerry has seen them interact at school, to the way they talk of each other in celebrity interviews. But Hyejoo’s poem...

Choerry looks down at the waves beside the boat in sadness. Jinsol notices, then looks at Jungeun worriedly.

“Hyejoo will be okay,” Jungeun reassures as their daughter nibbles nervously on her baguette. “She just needs some time.”

Choerry nods sadly. She just doesn’t know how long she can go on with the radio silence of Hyejoo in the group chat.

Jungeun offers a gentle smile. “How about we go to the coral gardens after this?” she suggests. “I think Mommy still knows where they are.”

“YES!” Jinsol cheers energetically, and Choerry shows a bright smile. Jungeun thinks about how Jinsol is almost as much of a child as their daughter is as the three of them glow under the sunshine.

“Please don’t divorce Mom,” Hyejoo says quietly, watching her normally bubbly mother walk next to her on the sidewalk outside the Hollywood set with blank eyes. Jiwoo had just arranged for Eunseo to drop her daughter off here after school, so the pair could spend some time together.

The child is, visibly, an emotional wreck. Not only has she lost all her friends in one night, but Hyejoo feels as if it’s *her* responsibility and hers alone to fix her mothers’ marriage.

Jiwoo’s afraid of letting her child out of her sight.

She saddens immediately, leaning towards Hyejoo. “Sweetie-”

“She’s sorry, you know.” Hyejoo whispers quietly, remembering Sooyoung crying to herself, constantly appearing sleep-deprived, and never doing anything anymore. “Really, *really* sorry.”

Jiwoo stops walking to look away with a pained expression. She wonders if Sooyoung is forcing her to say that and it makes her even more upset that the thought even crosses her mind.

Jiwoo bites the inside of her lip, and her eyes shine as if she’s holding in tears. She collects herself quickly though, then makes eye contact with her forlorn child.

“Hyejoo,” she whispers. The mother is not much taller than Hyejoo, but she lowers herself still to eye-level. “This is not your fault. This is between her and I.”

Hyejoo just stares. Of course it was her fault. Had she not delivered *that* poem, this fallout wouldn’t have transpired like it did. She doesn’t believe her mother at all.

“No, it’s between me too.” Hyejoo says quietly. “...Everything always has been.”

Jiwoo reaches to clasp her daughter’s hands. “This is not your fault,” the older woman repeats slowly, to let every word sink in. “You didn’t do *anything* wrong.”

Hyejoo’s eyes begin to water.

“Just make it go back to normal,” Hyejoo begs, on the verge of tears.

Jiwoo fights off her own. “I can’t,” she whispers weakly, then takes in a sharp breath as if struggling to speak. “Normal wasn’t okay for us. For you.”

“Then just come home. I don’t care anymore, that’s all I want now.” Tears spill from the child’s eyes as they stand together in the middle of the sidewalk. “You’re gonna come home,” Hyejoo asks with pained eyes. “Right?”

Jiwoo squeezes her daughter’s hands. “I would *never* leave you, Hyejoo,” she insists adamantly. “Ever.”

Hyejoo throws herself into her mother’s arms, hiding her face from the light and crying quietly.

“Of course I’m coming back,” Jiwoo offers weakly. She wasn’t sure when, but she didn’t think Hyejoo needed to hear that right now.

Hyejoo hopes Jiwoo won’t just be coming back to retrieve the rest of her belongings.

Choerry is laying upside down on her bed scrolling through TikTok when the phone buzzes in her hands. Her heart jumps in her chest at the thought of Hyejoo or Chaewon finally replying to her thousands of “I’m sorry” texts.

The pink haired girl might’ve felt a pang of disappointment, but when she sees who’s messaged her, she can’t help but let a smile grow on her face.

Yejin : heyyyyy

Yejin : um

Yejin : just my daily check in to make sure ur ok

Yejin : not that you need me to check in on u

Yejin : u r a strong independent woman

Yejin : girl

Yejin : not a woman girl but

Choerry giggles, tapping on the banner to reply to the shorter girl.

Choerry: Hi

Yejin : HET

Yejin : HEY

Yejin : hey..

Choerry: Yeah, I'm ok... it's weird that no one is talking in the group chat though :(

Choerry: Well, no one besides you and Yeri sending whale calls through audio messages...

Yejin : do u want me to stop? like i'll stop

Choerry: WHAT

Choerry: NO

Choerry: I know you guys are just trying to make everything seem normal. It makes me happy!

Yejin : omg r u gay

Choerry: ... What?

Yejin : nothing 😊

Choerry: You already know I like girls..?

Yejin : #\$\$%^TRE OKAY???

Choerry: You seem jumpy haha

Yejin : well you know I Love Hip Hop .

Yejin : hahaaaaa get it hop jump

Yejin : no,,,,,

Choerry: 😊😊😊😊😊😊😊😊 You're so funny

Yejin : i

Yejin : sorry choerry i gotta go suddenly

Yejin : i have to go record a new track in the STUDIO

Yejin : ok no i dont my mom is making me go to the farmers market with her

Choerry: Oooooo that's fun! Well text me later ok?

Yejin : WHAT WAS THAT!?!

Choerry: ...What was what?

Yejin : nothing

Yejin : nevermind

Yeojin : bye

Yeojin : ☺

Yeojin : UM THAT SENT ON ACCIDENT. I MEANT

Yeojin : GOODBYE.

Confused, Choerry chuckles, placing the phone screen down on her stomach. Things may be weird with her friends right now, but she knew that if anything, at least she still had her best friend.

Even if she was acting a little strange lately too.

The Southern California heat beats down on Dalla High's Sports Complex.

Hyunjin is tying the shoelaces of her bright yellow cleats on the curb of the parking lot, right where the concrete meets the soccer field grass. It was the beginning of Spring break, but when it came to high school soccer, daily practice would continue as per usual.

Most of the girls on the team were already geared up, doing various warm-ups before the real practice would begin.

Dalla High's Girls Soccer Team (or the Devils, as their mascot was called) were passing soccer balls back and forth, giggling and chatting about their day. Every girl had a partner to do this with except for Ryujin, who was silently juggling the ball from her feet to her thighs easily.

Ryujin had been silently keeping to herself for the last couple of practices. If the pink-haired girl was being honest, the only reason she hadn't said anything to her old friend was because she was fucking humiliated. It wasn't like she was super excited about the other girl being on the team again.

Ryujin could feel herself growing frustrated just looking at Hyunjin. Every glance felt like she was pouring salt into the open wound that was her ex-girlfriend dumping her. Not to mention she was definitely still a little embarrassed about getting her ass kicked on New Year's Eve *in her own house*.

Ryujin had figured that Hyunjin might try going out for the soccer team again, so she had immediately slapped her name on top of the try out sheet, hoping to scare Hyunjin into not joining.

It didn't work out in her favor.

Did Ryujin feel guilty about what had happened? More than one might think. As the thoughts of her actions increased, the more guilty the high schooler started to feel. But all that did was make the girl more frustrated and more intent on pushing those feelings as far down as possible.

But when she saw Heejin's black Impala pull up in the gravel lot next to Hyunjin, all feelings of guilt flew out of her body, rage and anger filling its void.

"Hey what are you doing here?" Hyunjin asks, approaching the car in front of her as her cleats crunch through the gravel. Heejin opens the door and steps out onto the cement, smiling.

"I just..." She stops for a second, racking her brain for a less embarrassing answer. However, seeing Hyunjin's sparkling eyes looking at her fondly, she decides to go with the truth. "I wanted to

see you before I um... My family's going on vacation for spring break so I just wanted to see you before I left. I'm headed to the airport right now actually."

Since the night of the dance, the girls had felt a silent shift in their friendship. They were more comfortable around each other than they had been since before their mutually traumatic misunderstanding. Both girls missed each other immensely and were working together anyway, so it was almost as if things had returned to somewhat normal.

The only difference now was that they both knew they had feelings for each other at some point in their lives, and neither of them really knew how the other felt in the present day. They also weren't sure of how to even bring it up since they weren't really the only two involved in this complicated situation.

Heejin had continued to be respectful of whatever was going on between Hyunjin and Lia. It wasn't really her place to say anything or even to have an opinion on them. She was the one who drove them together in the first place, and Lia genuinely seemed to care for the soccer player. Plus she didn't want to cause any more problems in Hyunjin's life than she already had.

But Heejin would be lying if she said she wasn't purposely flirting a little here and there. What, could you blame her? Have you seen Hyunjin?

"OH?" Hyunjin says a little too loudly as she usually does. Some of the girls on her team look over and start mocking their already flustered teammate. All for Ryujin, who seems to be gripping on to every bit of willpower she has in order to not kick her own soccer ball as hard as she could in the two girls' direction.

Hyunjin goes visibly red. "The annual one right? With your family?"

Hyunjin remembers Heejin throwing fits in the past when they were kids, all because she wanted to spend her spring break with her two best friends. The artist nods and sighs.

"Yeah. Florida this time." Both Heejin and Hyunjin cringe together and then laugh lightly at their similar response. "But I'll be back early so I can work on our St. Jihyo's event project thing. Thank god."

Before Hyunjin can even get a word out in response, Coach Krystal blows her whistle, signalling for her players to start practice. Hyunjin looks over and then turns back to Heejin who just smiles back at her, sending the soccer player's head spinning.

Hyunjin feels a sense of sadness, understanding that she wouldn't be able to see the other girl for a week at least. Until she remembers something that brings her immense guilt.

Lia had actually invited Hyunjin to go on a spring break vacation with her and her family, but Hyunjin had to decline due to practice. Instead of continuing on as planned, Lia had decided to stay home so they could spend more time together.

"Hyunjin! Would you like to join us anytime soon or...?" Coach Krystal shouts from a few yards away.

"Yeah I'm coming!" Hyunjin says, still looking at Heejin. The shorter girl nods knowingly, moving forward to place her hand on Hyunjin's arm.

"I'll text you ok?" She gives Hyunjin's arm a squeeze and Hyunjin just nods silently. The athlete lets out a sigh she didn't even know she was holding in as she watches Heejin drive off into the distance.

Hyunjin jogs over to the rest of her team and once she gets there, Bora and Siyeon start bumping into her playfully, making kissing noises.

“Fuck off.” Hyunjin says, making the girlfriends giggle.

“Alright. Today is a scrimmage day. And since you already picked this season’s captains-”

“WOOO!” Bora shouts, making the rest of the team shout as well, patting Hyunjin and Ryujin on their backs respectively.

“Yes, yes, thank you Bora.” The coach rolls her eyes, but a smile remains on her face. “We will be playing today like a normal game so I can make sure my final varsity line up is correct. Your captains will be picking their teams today. So please line up.”

The girls do as they are told, and after a few minutes, both Ryujin and Hyunjin have their respective teams.

“Do you want to kick off?” Hyunjin offers Ryujin. The pink-haired girl’s jaw clenches at the sound of her voice.

Something about Ryujin seems more aggressive than usual (Well as usual as she had been lately at least.) And Hyunjin was pretty sure it had something to do with the Chevy Impala that had showed up not too long ago.

“Sure. Whatever.” Ryujin says through nearly gritted teeth.

“Okay... We’ll take this side then.” Hyunjin says, and Ryujin walks away without another word.

Soon enough, Coach Krystal blows her whistle and starts the game.

Ryujin has been on Hyunjin’s back the entire time they’ve been playing. Hyunjin wouldn’t mind usually, except for the fact that she was a forward on her team and Ryujin was a midfielder. The girl had absolutely no reason to be on her like this.

The pink-haired girl was working extra hard to not only upstage Hyunjin, but make sure the brunette could barely get in contact with the ball. It was pissing Hyunjin off, especially since the girl was also elbowing her every chance she got.

Another elbow came her way as the ball neared them, Ryujin clearing the ball from her side of the field.

“Dude?” Hyunjin lets out, exasperated. She was definitely going to have a good amount of bruises later. Hyunjin knows that seeing Heejin talking to her might’ve triggered something in Ryujin, but it wasn’t like she was the one who asked the girl to show up at their practice.

Ryujin ignores her, continuing to maintain the unnecessary closeness.

Suddenly, Siyeon sends the ball Hyunjin’s way and the girl manages to get away from Ryujin’s grasp, sprinting at an angle towards the ball.

Hyunjin dribbles her way towards the goal, already outrunning the other defenders with Ryujin right behind her. Once the goalie starts stepping out towards her, Hyunjin makes a calculated shot

to the corner of the goal that she's sure is going in.

However, she can't see it hit the net, because *someone* slide-tackles her and sends her flying to the ground.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS YOUR PROBLEM?" Hyunjin shouts, looking up from the ground, Ryujin already picking herself up.

"That wasn't cool Ryujin, she could've gotten hurt." Nayoung, the Devils' main goalie says, rushing forward to help Hyunjin up.

"Well you weren't going to stop the goal. Obviously." Ryujin says bluntly, looking at the ball inside the goal.

"Ryujin." Coach Krystal says, jogging up to them. "Take the bench for the rest of practice."

"*But-*"

"You're lucky I'm not going to suspend you for the next three weeks for that *stupid* stunt you just pulled. This team needs BOTH of you girls to get anywhere this season. I won't have either of you hurting each other before we even get to our first game. So go take a seat. Now."

Ryujin clenches her jaw and walks off the field, making one of the JV team members take her place.

"You good?" The coach asks, and Hyunjin nods her head, shaking off the pain.

"Alright, 1-0 Hyunjin. Let's kick it off again."

Hyunjin was very stressed to say the least.

When practice finally ends after the full three hours and the team breaks away from each other, Hyunjin makes her way to her car. She sits wincing a little at the awkward pain she could still feel on different parts of her body from Ryujin's aggressive tactics. Her coach didn't think it was anything too serious, but told Hyunjin to ice it down and take it easy for the next couple of days.

The girl checks her phone as she puts the keys into the ignition.

Heejin ☺ : hey :) my flight is about to take off but I hope your practice went well!

Heejin ☺ : me in florida:

Heejin ☺ : [Downloading... 📶]

Hyunjin pulls out of her parking space and heads down the long stretch of parking lot, opening the attachment from Heejin as she drives. It's a gif of Abbi from Comedy Central's *Broad City* saying "*This place is so scary, there's like no gay people here.*"

Hyunjin laughs, but is once again overcome with nervousness when she receives another text.

Lia ☺ : Hiiiiii!!! Text me when you're done with practice! We can get some ice cream!!

The girl gulps. She had started feeling increasingly guilty about talking to Heejin lately, especially since the two had started working together. It *might* have to do with the fact that Lia had no idea

that Heejin and Hyunjin were both a part of the same St. Jiho's program.

It wasn't that Hyunjin didn't want to tell Lia, but more of the fact that she didn't really know how to. She knew Lia wasn't technically her *girlfriend*, and that she had made it clear they were not going to make anything official until Hyunjin felt like she could handle it. But still... something about it felt... wrong.

Hyunjin was just really overwhelmed. The co-captain had a lot on her plate already without the girl problems. School was adding a lot of stress to her already busy life, the end of the year nearing and finals lurking.

Not to mention, her job as a babysitter had seemingly come to a sudden halt. Sooyoung Ha had sent her a very formal text a few days ago saying they wouldn't need her services for at least a couple weeks. This was abnormal to say the least, since the parent that would reach out to her was almost always Jiwoo. This only made the high schooler worry about her little friend Hyejoo - *especially* after that poem.

On top of that, now she had to deal with Ryuji being an aggressive co-captain and-

THUMP

"SHIT!" Hyunjin screams as she brings her vehicle to a grinding halt. Being ridiculously frantic inside of her own head, she hadn't seen the teenage boy walking in front of her car when she hit him.

Hyunjin could feel her stomach drop into her ass as she hopped out of the car, praying on her life that this dude was ok. She was going extremely slowly, but still she had just *hit* someone! *I'm so screwed*. She thought as she saw the guy on the concrete.

"ARE YOU OKAY?!?! I'M SO SORRY!" Hyunjin shrieks deafeningly in panic.

The boy is slightly out of it, sitting up on the ground. She recognizes him but not by name. More like someone she's seen in the halls a few times before.

The guy had bright pink-red hair, was sporting a Devil's baseball uniform and even though he was sitting down, Hyunjin could tell that he was rather tall. The girl offers out a hand to help him up and after a few more seconds of blinking, he acknowledges her. He pulls himself up as Hyunjin assists him, the girl noticing that he's not angry, but instead just has a blank expression, It was as if he was trying to process what had just happened to him.

"I'm so so sorry, I really don't know what happened, I've just been so stressed lately and I just have a lot going on and I was thinking about it when I was driving and also looking at my phone which makes it worse and-"

"It's okay!" The guy says, sensing that Hyunjin was a little on edge. "I'm fine, see!" He shakes himself off and opens his arms in a 'Tada!' type of gesture.

Hyunjin just looks at the teenager confused. "Seriously?"

"Yeah! Don't sweat it. That was kinda fun actually. Maybe don't do it again though!" He says, smiling brightly and giving her a thumbs up as if to confirm that it *was* actually okay that she had just hit him with her car.

"You're... not going to like, press charges?" Hyunjin asks, very, *very* confused.

“Well my baseball game starts in about twenty minutes, and my phone is already charged I think.” He replies as if that made any sense with the conversation they were having.

“Well...” Hyunjin trails off, not wanting to push her luck any further. “Thanks um.... Um...”

“Yunho!” The teenager replies holding out his hand. Hyunjin takes it cautiously and he shakes it with the excitement of a small puppy. “You’re Hyunjin right? I saw some of your soccer games in the fall right before football season started. Pretty sick.”

“Oh. Well thanks. Again.” Hyunjin says awkwardly.

“Yeah!” He replies, the smile on his face still as happy as ever.

“YUNHO, COME ON DUDE.” One of his baseball teammates calls. A tall guy in Hyunjin’s Spanish class. His name was Seokmin or something.

“JUST A SEC, I GOT HIT BY A CAR.” Yunho shouts back nonchalantly, making Hyunjin cringe.

“WHAT!?” The taller guy screams back.

“I’M COMING!” Yunho belts out once more. He turns back to Hyunjin. “Well I’ll see you around!” He says, waving goodbye before jogging off in the direction of the baseball diamond.

Hyunjin just stands there in confusion until a car behind her honks, snapping her out of her thoughts.

The girl climbs back into her Volkswagon Bug, not knowing at all what on god’s green earth has just happened. Without thinking too much of it, she puts her vehicle in drive again and heads home, making sure not to hit anyone else on the way there.

A middle schooler stands in the ticketing kiosk outside an establishment of AMC Theaters. She is beatboxing poorly. Her mother dances the robot along to it as they queue in line.

The child in question is Yeojin Jo, and her mother Haseul is taking her out to the mall for a movie day.

“I can’t wait to watch it!” Haseul beams as she stares at the giant poster for the film she intends to watch today - *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 53: ‘He’s Still Alive?!’*

Yejin isn’t exactly in the mood. She’s been thinking about a certain class president more than usual lately during Spring Break. And as they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder.

Choerry’s presence at the front of Yeojin’s mind *all* the time has led her to want to watch the new sappy romance *Titanic - The Sequel* instead.

The principal notices her daughter staring at the poster. “How did it even get a sequel?” she squints. “Like, how does that work? ...The ship is underwater? They’re dead?”

Yejin doesn’t even hear her. She’s too busy fantasizing that her and her best friend are the stars of a new romance film.

Funny enough, Choerry has Yeojin on her mind too at this exact moment.

“Look Mom, I look like Yeojin,” she says to Jinsol in the department store, putting on a nearby bucket hat. She crosses her arms, just like Yeojin did on her latest album cover. ““Sup, woman!” Choerry jokes.

“Stop that,” Jinsol swats the hat off of her daughter’s head immediately in disapproval.

“Yeojin?” Haseul calls again. “I said are you excited for *Texas Chainsaw*?” Haseul sure is. The movie theater is doing a special deal where all tickets to Texas Chainsaw 53 come with a gift card to the barbaric American eatery downstairs, Texas Roadhouse. Haseul almost starts moaning at the thought of using her gift card for a tub cinnamon butter and giant onion blossoms.

Yeojin shrugs. “Eh.”

Haseul analyzes the middle schooler. She was a bit concerned for her daughter these days - Yeojin always looked so preoccupied. Plus, Haseul walked in on her daughter listening intently to “Beautiful Soul” by Jesse McCartney, and Yeojin screamed bloody murder.

Yeojin’s mouth drops as she sees two familiar faces inside through the translucent walls.

What a coincidence! Chaewon and Ms. Wong are retrieving ICEEs and popcorn. Chaewon is already staring right at Yeojin, like something out of a horror movie.

Yeojin glares back at her in excited alarm, then takes out her phone as Haseul buys their movie tickets.

Yeojin: the FUCK

Chaewon: i can smell your lack of talent from here

Yeojin: i smell like success

Chaewon: more like egg

Yeojin: damn what’d i do to u

Chaewon: i needed a laugh

Yeojin: . what movie r u watching

Chaewon: wouldn’t you like to know

Yeojin: CAN YOU JUST ANSWER THE QUESTION

Chaewon: wait

Chaewon: my mom just saw you guys rn

Chaewon: omg she wants to walk over

Yeojin looks up with wide eyes and yes, her favorite teacher and close friend are walking towards them. Ms. Wong waves amicably at her favorite student, while Haseul is still collecting the tickets.

“Thank you BRYAN,” the principal says with a big smile.

“Enjoy your movie,” the employee grumbles, irritated by Haseul’s energy. There was no reason for a middle-aged mom to be calling him directly by his name.

Haseul turns her body only to choke on her own spit. Her coworker stands in one of her most boho chic outfits, shining in the sun.

“Vivi!” Haseul stammers. *What the HELL!?* As if Vivi wasn’t on her mind this entire break already! This would happen to her. “Er- Um, and Chaewon! What’s up little lady!”

“I use queen/her pronouns..” Chaewon says daintily under her breath.

“What’s up my quee- okay,” Haseul stops awkwardly and mends eye contact with Vivi, who is just as happy to see her. The skin of her face is almost sparkling under the spring sun. “Hello!” Haseul greets her crush, albeit too formally.

Vivi giggles. “Hi Haseul,” she says, and Haseul feels like she needs to turn around, walk back into her car, and down an entire bottle of melatonin to calm down.

Chaewon stares up at them. Haseul and Vivi are continuing to make eye contact, despite not having any words coming out of their mouths.

Chaewon looks to Yeojin, who is staring at them as well with a gaping mouth.

“What movie are you two watching, Principal Haseul?” Chaewon asks to snap them out of it.

“*Texas Chainsaw Massacre 53*,” Yeojin groans, eliciting laughter from Vivi.

“I thought you wanted to watch this!” Haseul says pointedly. Yeojin shrugs with some mumbles. “We can movie-hop after this?” Haseul offers. Yeojin groans even louder. The last time they did that, they walked right out of *Detective Pikachu* into the middle of *Saw IV* and Haseul ended up paying for the ticket afterward anyway, taking all of the fun out of it.

“No.” Yeojin sighs. “What about you guys?”

“*Titanic - The Sequel*,” Chaewon declares proudly.

Haseul cheers, while Yeojin screams silently into her clenched fist. Her eyes are wide and everything.

“Are you alright Yeojin?” Vivi asks.

“Yes, fine,” Yeojin says, reverting to a normal facial expression. “That one just seems good. I wanted to watch that one also.” (And think about Choerry the whole time.)

“I didn’t know you were into romantic movies Yeojin.” Chaewon teases.

“YOUR MOM’S INTO ROMANTIC MOVIES!” Yeojin accuses in a panic, forgetting the mother in question is right there.

“I am, it’s true,” Vivi says quietly.

“Why don’t you go watch with them sweetie,” Haseul offers. “I can enjoy this film on my own.”

“Yeojin, how about you just swap tickets with me?” Vivi says suddenly. “And watch *Titanic* with

Chaewon?” Her daughter “*Ooooh*” s in excitement. “I’ll watch Texas Chainsaw.”

“Whaaat!” Haseul says too loudly. She almost starts sweating. “WHAAAAT!”

“Ma’am, please quiet down,” a staff member says by her side.

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Haseul says, while the rest of the girls giggle. “Whaaat,” she whispers. “You want to watch Texas Chainsaw Massacre 53: He’s Still Alive?!”

“I’m trying to be more adventurous,” the art teacher smiles. She’s not really. She wouldn’t want to if it weren’t Haseul on the other end.

...Or Nate! Right. Him too.

“I love chainsaws, Texan or otherwise.” Vivi states a little nervously and completely out of character.

“Ew.” Chaewon says.

“Oh I bet you do,” Yeojin snarks. As time goes by, the art teacher and her mother are beginning to behave more and more homosexually toward each other. *It’s only a matter of time now*, Yeojin cackles evilly within her own head.

“Here, take mine,” the art teacher swaps their tickets. “You two have fun.”

Chaewon cheers, and does some weird dance with her feet like she’s holding in pee. She’s a strange one alright.

“My hero!” Yeojin cheers. “Mother Vivi-sa!”

“Yeojin, you know you’re not supposed to call her that anymore,” Haseul says nervously. Irene filed a complaint that Yeojin should be suspended for blasphemy.

“Mother Vivisa! Mother Vivisa!” Yeojin cheers, as the two girls run off towards the movie theater leaving the two co-workers alone at the front.

“Well Principal Haseul,” Vivi stands, and Haseul swears she’s batting her eyelashes. “Would you like to watch this movie together?”

“HAHA, almost like you’re asking me on a date or something,” Haseul bellows in a comedic manly voice.

“Oh yeah, you know it dude,” Vivi says, echoing the same exact tone. Two sides of the same coin.

The irony of faux homoeroticism is too much for Haseul to wrap her head around. She’ll unpack it later, while she sits in her room staring at the ceiling trying to dissect the meaning of each and every one of Vivi’s words to her (as she always does... Before work, after work, weekends, and now spring break...).

“I would love to, ma’am.”

It starts during the horror movie trailers, when the crowd shrieks and Vivi impulsively grasps Haseul’s hand for comfort. She never lets go of it. Even when the movie trailer is long finished, and Haseul starts to feel herself begin to sweat from the nervousness - Vivi’s hand is still glued to

hers in the darkness.

The two educators exhibit a tachycardic pattern where during anything *remotely* scary, they retreat to each other in the theater seats, almost curling into each other.

When the Texas Chainsaw in question revs up for the first time in the feature film, and Vivi is practically hiding herself in Haseul's arm, Haseul dares to lift the armrest between them. And Vivi immediately leans into her side.

It feels sinful.

Haseul can't focus on the movie, on Vivi's scented shampoo near her face, on the familiarity of her body and can only think of- wait, what's the saying?

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear, does it ever really make a sound?

It feels *sinful* . But also, entirely illicit.

It's not like anyone has to know.

Vivi Wong and Haseul Jo walk out of Theater 10 like it never happened. But if you didn't know any better, you would think they were an established couple just by the way they laughed alongside each other on the way out.

They met Yeojin and Chaewon in the Justice adjacent to the theater. After downing an extra large ICEE, Yeojin was trying to see how many layers of clothing she could put on before it became impossible to walk. Chaewon was recording her for an Instagram live.

Hyejoo doesn't tune in. Upon noticing, Chaewon's heart sank to the pit of her stomach. Hyejoo always tunes in.

It didn't help that Chaewon had spent the entirety of *Titanic - The Sequel* thinking about Hyejoo. But Hyejoo was just her friend?!! RIGHT?!!

Friend is an optimistic stretch, considering that Hyejoo hadn't responded to any of her texts since the dance.

Chaewon didn't know what to think anymore. She liked Hyejoo, more than anyone else in the *entire* world. All she knows for sure is that she's miserable without her. It's not like Hyejoo had even let her finish her sentence at the dance either. She was just confused about the whole thing.

Which is maybe why she had shed a few tears during the movie. It's not like she was alone, as she was positive Yeojin had sobbed multiple times throughout the run time. Similar to what their respective parents had decided on as exiting the theater, the middle schoolers had a silent agreement that what happened during the movie needed never be spoken of again.

Yeojin was in four parkas and on the floor when Haseul and Vivi came to get them.

Now, "Since U Been Gone" by Kelly Clarkson is blasting through the restaurant Texas Roadhouse, while Haseul, Vivi, Chaewon, and Yeojin wait for a booth. Haseul got her gift card,

after all, and boldly invited the art teacher and her daughter to share it with them. The principal is over the moon, really.

When the waiter was seating them, he said “family of four”. Only Haseul heard. She choked on the complimentary peanuts.

How did this accidental happenstance evolve into a movie date that Haseul will pick apart for days, and now a *family* dinner together at her favorite restaurant?!

She has no idea. It’s probably a fever dream. But Haseul knows she doesn’t have a fever?! Unless... that’s what the virus WANTS her to think.

The chorus of “Since U Been Gone” snaps Haseul out of her thoughts.

“I can breathe for the first time! I’m so movin’ on, yeah yeah!” Haseul sings shamelessly while the four of them wait for the dinner rolls.

“Enough Mom, you’re doing everyone a disservice,” Yeojin cringes.

“I don’t know Yeojin, I think we should get her in front of a crowd.” Vivi smiles.

In response, Haseul does the “Debby Ryan face” that Yeojin had taught her how to do the other day, unintentionally looking straight at Chaewon right across the booth.

“Why are you looking at me?” Chaewon asks, freaked out.

“Oh I’m not! Just the meme.” Haseul clarifies with a giggle.

Chaewon opens Twitter.

@GOWONMINAJ: Principal H*seul just Debby Ryan’d me at Texas Roadhouse

“Did you two cry?” Vivi asks, referring to the emotional movie the two children elected to watch.

“NO.” Yeojin and Chaewon both say defensively.

“Your eyes do get a little puffy when you cry. come here let me look,” Haseul tries to reach over and grab Yeojin’s face but the girl slaps her mother’s hand away.

“I wasn’t crying!” Yeojin says.

“Aw, was the movie that romantic Yeojin?” Haseul asks. To be honest, she can barely concentrate on anything but Vivi’s arm rubbing up against hers in the tight booth. Vivi can’t think about anything else either. The two of them cling to this conversation for dear life. “Do you have a crush on someone?” Haseul giggles.

“NO,” Yeojin barks.

Chaewon’s eyes widen. “Oh my God. You do, don’t you?!”

“I DON’T.” The principal’s daughter is redder than a stop sign. “LOOK WHO’S TALKING.”

“Yeah I have a crush. On POWER and SUCCESS. I need to write that down...” Chaewon says pulling out her phone while their mothers laugh.

“Girls it’s okay to have a crush on someone!” Vivi says gently. If only she would just accept that

herself!

“I can read palms you know. I got an online certificate.” Chaewon announces, trying to change the subject.

“When was this?” her mother asks.

“Argh, I’ve always wanted to learn how to do that! You beat me to it,” Haseul says. “Do me!” She puts out her palm in front of Chaewon.

“Well let’s see here, oh wow,” Chaewon nods, pretending to interpret the lines. “Do you know what this one means?”

“What?”

“You’re gay,” Chaewon says with a nod. “Congratulations.”

“Wow, thanks!” Haseul cheers, while Vivi laughs along with her co-worker as if she’s in a vivid fantasy.

Suddenly, a waitress approaches with the rolls and cinnamon butter. “What a beautiful family!”

“Oh, I’m not- we’re not,” Vivi barely starts.

Yejin cuts her off. “Thank you!” she beams.

The waitress smiles back at her, then takes off.

Vivi doesn’t think that sounds so bad. In fact, it sounds lovely.

So she lets it slide.

Sooyoung stares into the abysmal black mirror of her phone. Her eyes burn from the amount of tears she’s shed today; her voice, hoarse. She cannot bear to look for a second more at the endless sea of text messages she’s sent to her wife. Sooyoung hasn’t even gotten a single response. Not even a read receipt.

The broken woman lays in the guest bedroom tonight. It was too depressing to spend another night in their exorbitantly sized master bedroom, the space Jiwoo and Sooyoung loved and made their own. Sooyoung felt this way with the entire house really.

She had never noticed the nothingness until now, the complete silence outside the manor’s walls (and inside them as well).

So in the guest bedroom she stays, obsessing on what she could possibly say next to elicit any sort of response.

Sooyoung has never felt so empty. The closest feeling she can compare is the loneliness she experienced as a child. But that was different - she never anguished knowing what beauty was, and how fast it could leave her.

A pathetic shell of her award-winning self shivers, still cold under the guest bed’s many covers.

Suddenly, muffled noise pierces through the silence.

Sooyoung shoots up from the bedsheets. There would be no ruckus at all on a normal night. Their estate was meticulously guarded; there was no way someone other than family would be inside stirring at this hour.

Jiwoo?

Sooyoung doesn't even dare to breathe as she zeros her senses in on the noise - a pained whimpering, a sporadic fit of cries.

Her head perks up in fear, listening for the source.

It's coming from behind the wall: the next bedroom over.

Hyejoo's.

Sooyoung discreetly pads over to press her ear against the wall, only to confirm her fears. Her eighth grader behind the wall can be heard crying out in pain.

The mother immediately rushes out of the guest bedroom in a panic, the light from the hallway now spilling into Hyejoo Ha's bedroom.

Her daughter is under her covers in the dark sobbing, ever so often wrestling with her sheets. Hyejoo is struggling to breathe but still appears to be unknowingly asleep. The sight is horrendous.

"Hyejoo!" Sooyoung calls loudly through the dark. Hyejoo is still thrashing, crying terribly hard in her sleep.

Sooyoung's arms instinctively reach out to her daughter to hold her. "Hyejoo!" she calls again, as Hyejoo still appears to be entrenched in a dreadful nightmare. The pained, horrified wailing of her child gives Sooyoung one of the worst feelings she has ever felt.

"Hyejoo, Hyejoo!" Sooyoung lowers herself onto her daughter's bed to peel the covers away from her and shake her awake. "Hyejoo!"

The child is now awake in a panicked frenzy, gasping for air and crying as her mother attempts to steady her in her arms.

"Hyejoo, Hyejoo please," Sooyoung says hastily as Hyejoo is stuck between sobbing trying to push her mother away.

"No, *NO!*" Hyejoo yells. Sooyoung's heart breaks, just like it did all those years ago, all over again.

But Sooyoung is too shell-shocked to comply, fighting the obviousness of her tears spilling over. "Shhh," she coos, as calmly as she can to quiet her daughter in the night.

Hyejoo's piercing cries are muffled in Sooyoung's chest. Sooyoung thinks she's heard her daughter scold her to 'Get away from me', but Hyejoo is clinging to her harder than she ever has.

"Shhhh," Sooyoung insists as gently as she humanly can, rubbing the smaller back the way Jiwoo did hers during any of her own night terrors.

Hyejoo cannot muster the anger for her mother anymore, and sobs loudly into Sooyoung's chest. Her mother holds her closer.

They fit awkwardly together. Hyejoo observes disorientedly that Sooyoung's embraces are nothing

like Jiwoo's. Sooyoung is sharper, bonier, while she holds her daughter loosely as if she's afraid of damaging her with her own self.

Sooyoung is terrified. She's convinced she's not doing this the right way, that Hyejoo is hating every second.

But she doesn't - not entirely.

Something that the child has always needed has been fulfilled, for the first time in years.

Hyejoo has always been alone. All her younger years, she's felt lonely - save when she was with one of the only people she felt could ever understand her.

The one person she saw as an older, stronger version of herself - the person she wanted to be when she grew up. The one whose presence made her feel whole.

Not many can say that about their own mother.

Sooyoung manages to comb her fingers through her daughter's thick black hair, the texture, she notes, that's just like Jiwoo's, and the color being just like her own.

"It's okay now," Sooyoung whispers. "It's okay."

Hyejoo hiccups wetly against her mother's chest, trying to catch her breath. "I-I don't k-know," she stammers.

"It's not real," Sooyoung whispers firmly, her hand drifting down to rub her daughter's shaking back. "It's okay now, I'm here..."

Sooyoung's heart feels familiar invisible hands clasping around her heart, their black nails digging into the tissue as tears come to her eyes. Despite Hyejoo finding comfort in her arms, all she can hear repeating in her ears is the sounds of her daughter screaming at her to get off of her.

Hyejoo cries now, harder than before. This time, Sooyoung is there for her.

"...A-Are you and Mom getting a divorce?" Hyejoo asks sharply.

"What?!" Sooyoung gasps. "No! No, Hyejoo no-"

Then, panic seeps into her soul.

What if that's what Jiwoo wants?

"I..." Sooyoung trails off, imagining for a split second her marriage falling apart. *I don't know*, she almost whispers. Hyejoo's shoulders shake in Sooyoung's arms, crying at the lack of a confident answer.

"We'll be okay," Sooyoung coos awkwardly in the dark. She's doing the best she can. "We'll be okay, Hyejoo," she whispers, reaching for the blankets to cover her shaking daughter's body with (and her own).

Sooyoung stays there, comforting her only child, until Hyejoo eventually cries herself to sleep.

When she does, Sooyoung stays, holding the eighth grader in her arms.

The CEO finds herself able to sleep too, for the first time in a long time.

“This is like, so terrible for the environment. I mean it’s 2020, shouldn’t alcohol companies have come up with biodegradable bottles or whatever by now?”

Hyunjin doesn’t hear Lia’s remark as she continues to pick up various glasses and plastic cups from the sandy ground beneath her.

The Dalla High students were outside of Lia’s family beach house, the sky beginning to brighten as the time ticks between late night to early morning. Hyunjin was helping pick up the trash left by the attendees of the night’s glorious spring break party held by the cheerleading captain herself.

Lia had told Hyunjin a week ago that she would be staying home instead of going on vacation with her family. *“I’ve always wanted to throw a spring break bash and since I’m staying I finally can! So don’t flatter yourself too much.”*

This was a complete lie.

Lia did not care about having a party in the slightest, they were too much of a hassle and she believed only people that mattered should be invited to some place as extravagant as her private beach house.

But when she saw the disheartening panic in Hyunjin’s eyes after telling her she was staying to spend more time with her, Lia was willing to say anything to save grace.

So she had thrown this party, which had actually gone rather well. She and Hyunjin had been all over each other, as usual, but tonight something seemed off. Lia wasn’t sure how they could be together all the time and still feel so distant.

If she was being completely honest, the weirdness hadn’t started tonight. Hyunjin had been acting distant for a little while now.

On top of that, the girl had also been weirdly attached to her phone lately, because of work. Or at least, Lia assumed it was because of work.

Hyunjin had just started a new job at the little middle school and she knew their daily routine would change. But things were a little too different for Lia’s liking.

It was driving the cheerleader up the wall. She wasn’t even the type to worry about things like this. It’s not like she wanted a real relationship anyway.

Well. She didn’t, before. It was always just pointless flirting before Hyunjin, she was just having a little fun with a cute girl.

But whenever she looked at said cute girl... it was like she wanted nothing more than to be able to call Hyunjin her girlfriend.

What’s worse is that it made Lia uneasy. Because the girl had never *ever* been so nervous to find out whether or not someone reciprocated her feelings. She was beginning to forget why she was

waiting to tell Hyunjin how she really felt about her in the first place.

“Earth to Hyunjin?”

Hyunjin finally looks up, snapping out of whatever garbage clean up trance she was in. Her eyes widened, some energy still left in her to make that ridiculous face even though she hadn’t slept all night.

“What? I’m sorry I was too focused.” Hyunjin replies.

Focused on how even after a night that *should* have gotten her mind off of Heejin had done completely the opposite.

Even after her little hit and run accident, Hyunjin couldn’t help but continue to text Heejin nonstop. The conversation just flowed so easily and things felt right when she was talking to her. But texting the artist at the party made Hyunjin feel like she was hiding something from Lia. So, she opted to not text her at all, telling Heejin that she had plans and wouldn’t be able to talk to her much that night.

Heejin ☺ : so you’re telling me i CAN’T have your attention all the time ☹ popularity changed you...

Heejin ☺ : im jk :p i have to wake up early tomorrow for my flight back anyway. it’d probably be in my best interest if i didn’t stay up to text you all night :)

Not that it stopped either of them from thinking about each other the entire time. In fact, Hyunjin hadn’t realized that not talking to Heejin would actually make her think about her more. She shakes Heejin out of her head for about the thousandth time that night.

Her heart sinks seeing the cheerleader’s eyes filled with concern as she looks over at her.

God, I am a horrible person. Hyunjin thinks to herself.

“Wanna take a break?” Lia asks.

Hyunjin nods immediately and Lia can’t help but send a soft smile her way, which unknowingly makes Hyunjin feel even worse. The glamorous girl lets the trash bag she was carrying around sink to the floor as she makes her way over to take the other girl’s hand. The cheerleader leads Hyunjin to a clean spot on the sand, close enough to the ocean to be engulfed in the sound of the waves crashing together.

They sit close, Hyunjin pulls her phone out of her back pocket and places it on the ground for comfort while Lia snuggles herself into the soccer player’s side. Lia makes sweater paws as she wraps her arms around the other girl. Both of them had changed into more comfortable clothes before deciding to clean up, overly large hoodies and sweatpants being the style for this chilly morning.

A silence falls upon them, and Lia has a hard time telling whether it’s comfortable or not.

“I had fun with you tonight.” The cheerleader says, making an attempt to break the deafening quiet.

“Me too.” is all Hyunjin replies.

She knows she’s making it harder for the other girl to hold a conversation, but Hyunjin can’t help

it. She feels like the heavy weight of guilt is going to crush her if she says anything more.

Lia feels a pang in her chest at the short reply. Maybe she should just tell Hyunjin how she's feeling. That she's never wanted to be in a real relationship with anyone until she met her. That everything Hyunjin does makes her feel like she's gasping for air, but in the best way possible.

Lia takes a deep breath, feeling a sense of vulnerability that only a late night of no sleep could bring to her.

"Hyunjin." She says, sitting up a little to look at the other girl.

The light from the rising sun reflects onto the soccer captain like a pink tinted filter. Hyunjin's eyes glisten in a way that gives Lia chills.

Bzzzzzz

Both girls look down at Hyunjin's phone, which has lit up. Quite unusual, since it was nearly 5 in the morning.

Heejin ☺ : waking up early: bad. seeing the sunrise... not so bad. thinking of painting it, what do we think?

Heejin ☺ : [Downloading... 📶]

Hyunjin doesn't wait for the picture to load before she flips the phone over.

It hits Lia like a freight train.

She realizes that Hyunjin's recent phone addiction wasn't for work. It was because she was rekindling a friendship with her old crush. Lia suddenly remembers why she couldn't tell Hyunjin how she truly feels. The rose tinted filter seems duller all of a sudden.

Because Hyunjin was still not over... whatever that was. And Lia had to respect that because well... she said she would.

It's not like they were dating.

But that didn't mean it didn't hurt enough to make her cry.

Instead of letting tears fall however, Lia quietly and softly turns Hyunjin's face towards her own, bringing their lips together.

Hyunjin's stiff at first, surprised by the sudden affection, especially after the text she knows they both just read. The guilt was overwhelming, but Lia's kisses were a paradox of comfort to her in this moment. Within seconds she was kissing her back just as deeply.

When Lia pulls back for air, Hyunjin's eyes flutter open as the cheerleader keeps their foreheads connected.

"Can we go inside? I'm so tired. I just want you to hold me." Lia asks, sounding defeated. It pulls at Hyunjin's heartstrings so intensely that she feels as though they'll break.

Hyunjin knows she shouldn't. That it's not fair for her to be doing this when she has had someone else on her mind the entire night. But in this moment, it felt as though leaving her would only make them both feel worse.

So Hyunjin nods, and they walk into the beach house quietly, settling down in Lia's room.

As Lia let's Hyunjin's arms wrap around her, she knows that it doesn't feel right. She wants Hyunjin to be hers, but not like this. Not when it feels so... *sad*.

But the sun continues to come up, and her own eyes were drooping down. Lia decides to let all of her feelings drift away as she herself did into sleep.

She could deal with whatever was going on with Hyunjin another day. But for now, she was tired.

Unrequited love is exhausting, after all.

Sooyoung sits in her usual spot, uncomfortable. The rain is back again, as if purposely switching on to bring her down every time she tries to deal with her problems. "So what do I *have*."

Tzuyu narrows her eyes at her rudest, most entitled patient. "What do you *have*?"

"Yes." Sooyoung says, without any further explanation. She wants a diagnosis.

Tzuyu looks at her notes in her lap. *At the very least, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression*. But she isn't qualified to say that.

"I think you have an inner child that is still suffering to this day, and issues you never confronted before you had a child yourself."

"No," Sooyoung refutes. "I mean what mental illnesses do I have."

"I am not a psychiatrist, Ms. Ha." Tzuyu says, much to the CEO's annoyance. "But I can tell you right now that medication will not solve all your problems."

"And what *are* my problems."

Where to start. Tzuyu almost says out loud.

"Don't be shy," Sooyoung croaks bitterly.

"I think the first thing we should focus on is how your upbringing affects the relationship with your daughter."

"What about it."

"Why do you think your daughter is upset with you?" Tzuyu asks, a repeated question that's needed to be asked.

Sooyoung looks out the rainy window, not knowing how to answer. "It's- It's just-..." Her therapist patiently waits. "I don't treat her like Jiwoo does."

"What do you mean?"

"...For instance... Jiwoo loves to hug her. Squeeze her tight and be very affectionate. I don't do that."

"When was the last time you held her?"

Sooyoung pauses to think. "I don't know. Years. Wait- no, I did the other night." Tzuyu raises an eyebrow. "I've been staying in the guest bedroom. Which is near Hyejoo's room. We share a wall. At around three... Or four or so, I heard her crying very loudly all of a sudden, thrashing around."

The therapist listens intently at the new development.

"I went into her room- I don't know, I thought she might have been attacked, or something. But she wasn't. I think she was having a nightmare."

"You have nightmares, don't you?"

Sooyoung bites the inside of her cheek nervously. "Yes."

Tzuyu scribbles something at lightning speed, and Sooyoung wonders if it's even legible. "Go on," she says.

"I held her. She didn't want me to, at first."

"That must have hurt," Tzuyu says frankly.

"Not as much as it did the first 100 times."

Tzuyu raises an eyebrow. "What do you mean by that?"

"When she was an infant she would get upset when I picked her up." Sooyoung confesses sourly. "She would cry and beg for Jiwoo. Not me."

Tzuyu recoils a bit from such a harsh confession. "That is heartbreaking," she says sincerely. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well." Sooyoung says, bottling that back up. "Anyways. She settled down. And then she asked me in tears if Jiwoo and I were getting a divorce."

"And what did you say?"

"I said no." Sooyoung frowns. "The truth is that... I... don't even know if I'm at liberty to say. I haven't heard from her. Nothing at all. I don't know how long this is going to last."

Tzuyu nods. "Then?"

"Then I held Hyejoo until she cried herself to sleep," Sooyoung says flatly, but she can almost feel her heart deflate. "Then I fell asleep there. Then she woke up before me, went to her game room, and we acted as if it didn't happen."

Tzuyu scribbles notes again, more this time. Sooyoung feels threatened as she watches the pen gossip about her to the paper. Tzuyu nods, as if puzzle pieces in her mind were coming together.

Sooyoung expects another question about that night.

Instead-

"Tell me about a good memory you have with your daughter." Tzuyu says.

Sooyoung sits in silence. Tzuyu clicks her pen, wondering if Sooyoung is even going to respond.

"When she was in elementary school," the CEO starts quietly. "She had an event called Career

Day. ...The children could invite parents to speak to the school.”

Tzuyu nods patiently.

“She was a quiet kid even then, you know. She couldn’t have been more than six years old when she walked into my office and...”

“*Mama, can you talk to my class for career day?*” Hyejoo had asked her favorite mother, shyly, all those years ago.

“She asked if I could speak.” Sooyoung said, looking down at her feet. “And I asked... Why. And she said...”

The air is taut with tension, and Sooyoung feels like she can barely speak.

“Because I wanna be like you, and I think the other kids would want to, too.”

Tzuyu’s eyes soften in endearment. Empathetically, she watches as Sooyoung struggles to speak, still looking away.

“So I said yes. And I went to her school, I spoke for them,” Sooyoung switches to factual tone to push down her emotions. “I prepared a little presentation. And you know, she’s quiet, she still is.

But at the very end, when there was the round of applause, she shouted ‘That’s my mom!’” she smiles. “With the biggest smile on her face.”

It feels like eons ago.

Sooyoung doesn’t even notice the hot tears on her cheeks until Tzuyu pushes the tissue box toward her on the table.

When Sooyoung wipes away her tears, Tzuyu speaks. “Here’s what I think,” she says softly. “You and your daughter love each other. But you’re both very angry and don’t know how to express that.”

“I don’t know if I would say she loves me.” Sooyoung says sourly.

“She does.” Tzuyu nods. “She’s angry because she loves you. Angry that you don’t see her.”

Sooyoung looks at her nervously.

“What she wants is for you to give her more than just a fraction of the energy you give your wife.”

“I love my spouse differently than I love my child...?” Sooyoung says in disbelief. “So does every other parent.”

“I understand you love them in different ways.” Tzuyu continues. “But you must understand that while she’s a small accessory to the way you go about your life, you are her *entire life*,” the therapist says firmly. “She has known you, and loved you, even before she knew she could. You’re her mother.

“You don’t govern her like some executive. You are everything to her. Your love and care means

more to her than she will ever be able to verbalize,” Tzuyu asserts, her voice thick with emotion. “And it always has. Which is why it is your duty to work through everything wrong from your childhood that you’ve simply shoved down,” Tzuyu flips through her notes. “Because not doing so has been causing you to spill it onto your daughter. Who doesn’t deserve to live out her childhood wondering why her parents take it out on her. Just like you didn’t deserve that during yours, Sooyoung.”

When Tzuyu finally stops talking, her words still echo through Sooyoung’s head. She doesn’t even know where to start with any of that. It’s like she tried to drink water from a fire hydrant.

Tzuyu watches as Sooyoung stares off at the floor, eyes wide as if processing too much information. “I’m going to give you some homework.”

Sooyoung is perplexed. “This isn’t a class...?”

“You need at least 20 minutes a day of skin to skin contact, ideally an embrace, to maintain the oxytocin threshold in your brain.” Tzuyu says. “Are you familiar with this fact?”

“No, I’ve never heard that before,” Sooyoung answers. “This wasn’t a problem for me until recently.”

“It’s been a problem for your daughter her entire life.”

Sooyoung is speechless.

“Your assignment is to hug your daughter. At least 12 minutes a day.”

Millions of alarm bells go off in Sooyoung’s head. “What?!”

“Ideally 20 minutes, if you can.”

“She is never going to want that!” Sooyoung exclaims.

“She already does, Ms. Ha,” Tzuyu hums. “That’s your homework. I expect progress by our next session.” The therapist closes up her binder calmly, while Sooyoung sits dumbstruck. “And recommend her to me,” Tzuyu adds while standing up. “I would love to work with her if she is open to it. I love to work with families when I can.”

Sooyoung stays glued to the seat, not knowing what to do or say.

“Take care Ms. Ha, and I will see you next time.” Tzuyu says while walking out. “Lock this door on the way out.”

Sooyoung had always thought that wearing a disguise in public was childish. However, considering all of the events happening with her recently, the woman had found herself doing things that she would’ve never done in a long time, or *ever*.

Including shopping for her own groceries.

Jiwoo still hasn’t said a word to her. And with Hyejoo starting school again soon, Sooyoung will need to start taking care of packing her snacks.

She hates that they’re adapting to life without Jiwoo.

Sooyoung pulls her hood strings tighter around her face as she walks through the automatic doors of a Target. The bright red decor dimmed by the gigantic black sunglasses covering her eyes. She searches her designer purse for her phone where she opens the list of food she asked Hyejoo to help her make the other day. (Well, more like she stuttered in front of Hyejoo about the empty fridge until the kid understood what she was asking of her.)

Sooyoung scans the screen.

- **Bagel Bites**
- Fruity Pebbles cereal
- Bread
- Nutella
- Cosmic Brownies
- Blueberries
- Pringles chips (Any kind but NOT CHEDDAR.)
- Apples
- !!!!! WATERMELON !!!!!!!

Sooyoung panics slightly as she continues to read... She doesn't even know what some of these products are. What the hell is a Cosmic Brownie??

It's not that she's never been grocery shopping before, but it's just... been a while. Plus, she was pretty sure Hyejoo had added a few things her mother would never allow if she actually knew what they were, but Sooyoung decides to let it slide... if she can find them.

She notices some women moving past her to grab a bright red cart and she follows their lead, clearly out of her element. She was sort of wishing she hadn't placed the Ha family's grocery runners on leave right now.

With a sigh, she braces herself and enters the food section.

About 2 hours later, Sooyoung cannot find the Bagel Bites to save her life.

She assumed they'd be with the bagels, which she had assumed would be with the bread.

Apparently she was wrong.

So, she had continued to go through the list, finding things painfully slowly. She could ask for help, except she didn't want anyone to recognize her. (And also, she just had way too much pride... something Tzuyu had been telling her to work on, but Jesus, couldn't she have one day off?)

Now she had reached the final item, but she had searched high and low throughout the bread section to no avail. The CEO was about to call it a day when-

“SOOYOUNG?”

At the entrance of the aisle was Principal Haseul, waving frantically behind a red cart of her own, speaking way too loudly.

Sooyoung freezes immediately, hoping that, like a dinosaur, Haseul would not detect her presence if she stood still, right in the middle of her line of vision.

“SOOYOUNG HA! CEO OF YVES SAINT LAURENT ISN’T THAT YOU? PROUD PARENT OF ST. JIHYO’S PRESIDENTIAL ACADEMY, SOOYOUNG HA!” Haseul is basically screaming as she approaches her.

Good god. Sooyoung thinks. She finally turns to look at the other woman, waving with the absolute lowest energy she could possibly muster.

Haseul pushes off the floor to stand on the cart as it glides the rest of the way to the other woman. The teacher miscalculated her angle though, and she slams into a bread shelf, knocking loaves onto the ground.

“Oh jeez.” Haseul says, picking them up. “You know last time this happened Yeojin just stood there laughing at me. She didn’t even help me pick anything up. And it was the salsa jar section too! There was broken glass all over the place...”

Sooyoung raises an eyebrow as the tiny principal collects the fallen loaves.

She looks up at Sooyoung. “What are you doing here Sooyoung Ha!”

“Can you please stop saying my name.” Sooyoung replies, pulling the hood over her face even more.

“Ohh are you *undercover*?” Haseul whispers.

“... Sort of.” The taller woman says, turning back to her own cart in an attempt to escape but Haseul only follows.

“Oh okay, well your secret is safe with me... Louise.” The principal winks and Sooyoung just stares back at her with a blank expression. “But really what are you doing down here! I’ve never seen you around! Don’t you and Jiwoo have someone to do this for you?”

Suddenly, Sooyoung stops. “Um. We used to...”

The CEO doesn’t know if she’s just drained from being inside of the store for two hours, but the questions makes her feel like she’s going to collapse. The thought of Jiwoo right now just makes her want to cry. It always does these past few days.

“We used to do a lot of things... together...”

Haseul notices that she is speaking in a much quieter tone than before and Sooyoung is now falling to the floor slowly, like something out of a cartoon.

The principal’s eyes go wide, unsure of what is happening.

“Why? Is she busy? I saw her on MasterChef the other day, so that makes sense!” Haseul attempts

to sound encouraging but the other woman only continues to sink to the floor.

Sooyoung is nearly laying on the white tile completely. “I don’t... know... what she’s up to...”

The woman lets her hooded head hit the dirty hard ground and Haseul winces. “I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHERE I AM.”

Haseul lowers herself to the floor, crouching as carts wheel by. “You’re at a Target silly!” She tries to keep a positive attitude even though Sooyoung is now sniffing. “Do you need a worker to help you because I know them personally-”

“JIWOO LOVED RETAIL WORKERS!” Sooyoung bellows suddenly, curling onto her side. “SHE WOULD CALL THEM WAITRESSES!”

At last, something clicks in Haseul’s brain.

“IS JIWOO DEAD?” the principal shrieks.

(Never said it was something right that was clicking.)

“NO! SHE JUST *HATES* ME!” Sooyoung cries, curling up on her side on the floor. Families walking by are staring. “AND IT’S ALL MY FAULT BECAUSE I JUST MAKE THINGS HORRIBLE FOR PEOPLE I LOVE AND I CAN’T DO ANYTHING WITHOUT HER! I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT THE *FUCK* A BAGEL BITE IS!” Sooyoung is now laying facedown on the cold tile.

Haseul stands, suddenly excited. “I know where those are! They’re my second favorite snack! My first are those little mini muffins. It’s like four muffins in one packet. If i try hard enough I can fit them all in my mouth at the same time you know. I was in Guinness once.”

It’s silent for a second before Sooyoung snuffles. “You know what a Bagel Bite is?”

“Yes!” Haseul answers, but hesitates. “But you have to get up first for us to go there... I would offer to carry you but I haven’t worked on my arms enough yet. My personal trainer says I need to-”

“Please, I’m standing up.” Sooyoung says, gathering herself just to get Haseul to shut up. She stops to think for a second and then turns to Haseul. She looks the small woman up and down. “You have a personal trainer?”

Haseul turns red. “Well technically, I watch YouTube videos, but the woman is very in muscular and I feel like we connect through the screen so-”

“Haseul! How are you doing today!” A random employee in a red shirt says, waving his hand excitedly, then letting his wrist go limp. He lowers his voice. “We just got our first shipment of Deadliest Catch Season 15 DVDs. They don’t go on shelves until next week, but I think I can pull a few strings for you!”

Haseul gasps with excitement and then regains her composure after seeing Sooyoung’s blank expression staring back at her. “Taeyong, that would be amazing but I’ll have to come back later for it. I’m kinda on a mission right now.”

“Of course. I’ll keep one saved for you.” He winks before walking back to a different aisle.

Haseul turns back to Sooyoung. “Follow me for the Bagel Bites!”

The two women finally begin to make their way back to the checkout area after another 20 minutes of Haseul being called over to converse with employees.

“Do you own shares here or something?” Sooyoung asks as she follows Haseul down another aisle. “Or own the building? Everyone is being very friendly with you. It is odd.”

Haseul laughs, not catching on to the slightly rude tone in Sooyoung’s voice. “No! I’m just one of their best customers. They love me because I’m always here.”

“Oh.” Sooyoung says. “Doesn’t that bother your wife?”

Haseul turns back to look at the CEO, puzzled. “Sorry?”

“That you’re always here... unless she sends you here?” Sooyoung asks.

“...But... I’m not married?” Haseul says, a questioning look on her face.

“Then who is that teacher you are always around? With the red hair?”

Haseul nearly chokes on her own spit. “I- I’m not, WE ARE *NOT*- Um I’m not married. To her. Or anyone. Ever.”

“Oh?” Sooyoung raises an eyebrow. “Sorry, is she your girlfriend then?”

“NO!” Haseul screams way too loudly, making heads turn. She smiles awkwardly at the families strolling by. “We are just friends. She has a boyfriend,” Haseul can barely stomach the last sentence.

“But she flirts with you all the time. And you do the same. I’ve had the displeasure of seeing it on multiple occasions.” Sooyoung states simply. “You’re telling me you don’t have any feelings for her whatsoever?”

Haseul blinks. “Well... I mean. HAHA I mean yes I do really like her. Just kidding! Ha. HAHA no I’m not.”

Sooyoung is still hiding her eyes behind her dark sunglasses but Haseul can feel the judgement seeping out from behind them.

“Let’s get to those registers then shall we!”

Haseul continues to wave at several more employees as they approach the check out stations but Sooyoung stops dead in her tracks. Haseul stops as well, waving a hand in front of the woman. “Um? Earth to Sooyoung?”

Haseul follows the other woman’s eyeline and immediately understands what caused the sudden halt.

Sooyoung’s wife (ex-wife? It’s still unclear to Haseul) is plastered on the cover of multiple tabloids stocked at the registers. Jiwoo’s face, clearly full of stress, hides behind her own hands in a dark hoodie and sunglasses of her own, as the headlines read **“I’M JUST GOING THROUGH A LOT RIGHT NOW.”** She looks almost as rough as Sooyoung.

Sooyoung breaks out into a sob, nearly collapsing again, except Haseul lifts her back up to her feet

before she can. Before the principal can even say anything, the CEO runs up to the nearest register and starts snatching magazines off the racks, hugging all of them tightly. An unfortunate employee walks past her as she's doing so and gets taken by the collar.

"Give me every single one of those magazines right NOW!" Sooyoung cries hysterically.

"Ma'am, I don't think that's possible." The short man says, a little frightened.

"*DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?!*" Sooyoung shrieks.

"*DO YOU KNOW WHO SHE IS?!*" Haseul repeats, screaming with similar fervor. "YOU HEARD HER ALREADY! GIVE HER EACH ONE YOU HAVE! EVEN THE ONES IN THE BACK!" Haseul shouts, approaching the employee. She lowers her voice. "I'm so sorry Woozi, please just help her out she's having an emotional breakdown."

Woozi nods, and Sooyoung releases him from her clutches as he makes his way to the backroom. The taller woman looks over at Haseul.

"Thanks..." She says, moving the stack of magazines in her arms to wipe the tears from falling down her face.

"No problem Sooyoung!" Haseul says happily, patting Sooyoung on the back. "That's what friends are for!"

Sooyoung tenses up at the thought of *Haseul* being her friend.

Maybe she had misjudged the woman in the past, but still it was... *weird* wasn't it? Nevertheless, Sooyoung *did* appreciate someone being on her side right now.

"How about I treat you to lunch? I still have some money in my gift card to Texas Roadhouse!" Haseul says with a big smile and horrible Southern accent.

Sooyoung squints. "What the hell is that? Some kind of nuclear waste site?"

"*AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!*" Haseul laughs very loudly, in the middle of the fruits section of Target.

Many people halt their carts to look over at them. Sooyoung hides her face in embarrassment.

"You didn't tell me you were FUNNY, SOOYOUNG!" Haseul says, still stumbling over her own laughter. "Oh geez, oh my god-" Haseul says before wheezing so hard she needs to bend over.

Sooyoung looks at her daughter's principal, the Bagel Bites in her cart, and the middle class citizens around her, and almost has a nervous breakdown.

"Oh, we're going to get along great!"

Hyejoo's eyes are glued to the TV when she hears a splat from outside, followed by a frustrated groan.

Dog leaps to the window first, pawing out of the eighth grader's lap to peep his head over the windowsill. At the sight of Sooyoung, he barks happily with a wagging tail.

Hyejoo stares at the video game, indifferent and straight-faced. The game room barely has any

light streaming through- only that from Dog's head peeping through the blinds excitedly.

The girl sighs. She goes to peek out of the window, and sees that Sooyoung has tried carrying too many bags at once and has splattered the milk gallon on the floor. Now the CEO is trying to close the trunk of her Mercedes with her ass.

Hyejoo walks out to the mansion's bright courtyard, her eyes hurting from the light. Silently, she walks to her mother by the car. Sooyoung is now trying to close the trunk with her head. "Ow," she growls, not hearing her ghost of a daughter behind her.

Hyejoo snorts.

Sooyoung turns around to face her, startled. "Are you laughing at me?" The question comes out more terrifying than she intended it to, and it shows by the way Hyejoo has immediately wiped the smile off her face.

Sooyoung guiltily turns back to the grocery bags, regrouping them by her feet. She doesn't know how to say she's sorry.

"Maybe if you try to hit it with your head harder it will close this time," Hyejoo jokes quietly. It's not like she has anything better to do.

"Ha ha," her mother laughs sarcastically.

Wordlessly, Hyejoo picks up some of the grocery bags to help Sooyoung bring them inside. Sooyoung doesn't really notice until she turns around to see a chunk of them gone, along with her.

When Sooyoung enters the mansion, Dog is ecstatic and jumping up to her hands. "Agh!"

As the two of them bring the bags to the kitchen, Jiwoo's kitchen, Hyejoo narrows her eyes at the fact that six full grocery bags are filled with boxes of Bagel Bites. "Why did you get so many Bagel Bites...?" she asks, while Sooyoung re-enters the excessively large home.

"You said you wanted those, didn't you?" Sooyoung asks, coming off once again too harshly.

Hyejoo gets too intimidated, and just nods. But there are just so... *many*.

Hyejoo stays to help her mother put the groceries away. She knows Sooyoung doesn't know where anything goes, and can tell by the way she places the Bagel Bites in the walk-in pantry next to the cereal.

"You don't have to help me, Hyejoo." Sooyoung says, feeling scared by the awkwardness between them. (Tzuyu would say this is a perfect moment to stay and talk.) "You can go talk to your friends."

"I don't want to." The eighth grader says. Sooyoung can tell something is bothering her.

"What about your girlfriend," Sooyoung asks.

"She's *not my girlfriend*." Hyejoo snaps back with a locked jaw.

Sensitive subject, Sooyoung thinks, as she arranges the main fridge with raised eyebrows. She

painfully notices the whole milk Jiwoo uses for baking, recently past its expiry date. The CEO pretends she didn't see it.

"What about..." Sooyoung is at a loss for names. "Choerry Kim."

"Choerry's not my *friend*." Hyejoo says, equally cold.

"Oh really?" Sooyoung asks, her back still to her daughter. "I thought you two became friends this year. Your mother-"

She stops.

Sooyoung clears her throat, suddenly. "...You don't like her anymore?" she continues.

"No. She's too much." Hyejoo snaps coldly. "Too happy. Happy with a capital H."

"Your mother is happy with a capital H," Sooyoung counters, referring to her wife again. She can't help herself anymore.

"That's... Completely different." Hyejoo fiddles with the boxes. "Mom is special."

Sooyoung smiles a little bit, saddened, as she sorts the groceries in front of her. "Mom is special," she repeats with a nod.

They silently put the groceries away. Sooyoung realizes this is the longest conversation they've had in a very long time.

"What happened?" Sooyoung asks. She's really bad at this. The mother *wants* the conversation to keep going, *wants* to say many, many things. She just never knows how.

Sooyoung turns to the eighth grader, who looks too angry to be eating a cosmic brownie.

"You don't have to tell me," Sooyoung waves off.

Suddenly, she feels Tzuyu's critical, glowing red eyes watching her from above. *Say something constructive!*

"You don't have to tell me, I just hope..." Sooyoung's mouth twists at the difficulty. "You are... okay." Awkwardly, she gives a thumbs up.

Hyejoo furrows her eyebrows in confusion. Her mother looks horribly constipated.

"...Okay," Hyejoo says. *This is weird.*

Hyejoo doesn't want to talk to her.

(Of course, she's sure Sooyoung is only talking to her because her other mother isn't here.)

"Alright bye," Hyejoo says. She immediately retreats upstairs.

Sooyoung cringes.

She turns around at the sound of gnawing, only to find that teething Dog is nibbling at the corners of her billion-dollar home. "*Hey!*"

“She won’t respond to me. I don’t know where she is or when she’s going to just answer or come home. I’ve called her about ninety times.”

“She is not your lost pet,” Tzuyu asserts, tactless as ever.

Sooyoung recoils from her therapist’s accusatory implication. “I don’t see my wife that way at all...?” The CEO insists with a distressed look on her pale face.

Tzuyu hums with a sigh. “I didn’t necessarily say you did, my point is simply that Jiwoo is not a lost puppy in which you can keep screaming her name and expect her to come running home.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do...?”

“It seems that way to me,” Tzuyu comments calmly, playing with her pen again between her fingers. Sooyoung doesn’t know what to say to Tzuyu anymore on their third session. She’s surrendered, accepting that for once she is probably less knowledgeable.

“Jiwoo is your partner, who is upset with you,” Tzuyu continues. “She is implicitly communicating to you that she needs space. Smothering her and dumping your needs on her while she’s in this state is the last thing that will bring her home.”

Sooyoung huffs silently, with closed eyes.

Why is everything so difficult?

“I don’t want her to think I don’t love her.” Sooyoung’s voice shudders.

“She won’t,” Tzuyu says confidently from across her patient. Sooyoung has no idea what to do now, and it shows. “I suggest you send her one more message,” Tzuyu offers. “Acknowledging that she needs space. You have made your mistakes and you cannot undo them. You can only apologize, but you’ve done that already I assume nearly a hundred times in every which way.”

Sooyoung finds it hard to maintain eye contact with someone who seems to read her so flawlessly.

“I know you crave control,” Tzuyu says. “You feel the need to stay in control at all times to prevent the vulnerability of your childhood from being exposed in your adulthood,” she reads effortlessly. “You’re not the only one. But the key to lasting relationships for you is about learning to loosen your grip on others.”

Sooyoung puts her head in her hands for what feels like the millionth time this week.

“It’s hard work Ms. Ha,” Tzuyu says gently.

Sooyoung has been through hell, yet she somehow feels like this is the hardest work she’s ever done in her life.

“Not many people have the courage to do this, you know. To try and sort themselves out, to try to be better.” Tzuyu says sincerely. “Do it for your family.”

Sooyoung looks back at all her previous texts to Jiwoo. Long, pleading, whiny even.

Although she feels the urge to apologize once more, she’s said all that she can at this point.

She decides to keep her final one short, declarative.

Sooyoung Ha: I started seeing a therapist.

The CEO presses send.

Read 11:03 PM

Sooyoung's gasp is caught in her throat. She cannot even believe her eyes.

For the first time since she left, Jiwoo is here. Digitally, but it's something!

Sooyoung's heart runs rapidly in her chest. Stunned, she watches the screen intently.

For a second her typing bubbles appear. Then, nothing.

Seconds go by, tens of them until a minute has passed.

Nothing.

Sooyoung feels hollow inside.

11:10 PM

VOICEMAIL from Sooyoung Ha: *"Jiwoo, it's me- I... I just want to tell you that I'm going to give you your space.*

I haven't been fair to you. I'll respect your boundaries.

My therapist... said I should be more considerate of your feelings and others around me. So I hope this helps in any... In any way I can.

It's very hard. Therapy. But I... I suppose it's overdue.

She wants to see Hyejoo too. I told Hyejoo, and obviously she's not jumping at the opportunity- but, okay I'm getting off topic.

I'm sorry I've been smothering you with texts and calls. And bothering your staff as well. This will be my last attempt, I promise.

I just want you to know I'm so sorry for hurting you. And-...And our daughter. I'm sorry for what I've done to this family.

I'm so sorry Jiwoo.

...I'm trying now.

We'll be here at home, okay? I- I just hope you're safe. I'll be here if you need me.

Okay.

I lo- “

BEEP

Time limit exceeded.

Haseul whistles peacefully as she walks across the empty St. Jihyo's hallway. She's here on a weekend, finishing up some administrative work in her office. Yeojin would be home alone just for a few hours. She said she was going to do some work by the pool, which Haseul lauded.

Swinging her key lanyard around and whistling, Haseul turns the empty corridor.

“Hey Mamas,” a low voice calls out suddenly behind her.

The principal jumps, startled. Haseul turns around with her hand over her racing heart, only to find that it's just Amber, the school janitor, doing some weekend cleaning. “Amber! You scared me!”

Amber sinks her mop into the yellow cart. She cleans the floor quietly, coming out of the girls' locker room.

“Everything going alright here?” the principal asks with a kind smile.

“Yeah, all good,” Amber murmurs.

“Great.” Haseul smiles at her once more. “Well, you have a great day now Amber. Thanks so much for all your work.”

“No problem boss,” Amber replies, and Haseul continues on her walk to her office. “Oh, boss-”

“Hm?” Haseul turns a bit farther down the hallway. “Do you need anything?”

“No, just wanna let you know that the dome on one of the security cameras was loose, so I fixed it up for ‘ya.”

Haseul cocks her head in puzzlement. “What security camera?”

“C'mere,” Amber gestures, and Haseul walks over to follow her into the girls' locker room.

Amber walks past the soft colored lockers, past the bathroom stalls and showers all the way to the hallway leading to the St. Jihyo's gym. Shortly before the door to the gym, Amber points at a small, spherical security camera mounted in the ceiling's corner.

“That one,” Amber says in her gruff voice.

Haseul stares at the black dome. “Huh.” If the principal was being honest, she had completely forgotten they had security cameras installed in the first place.

“The cap was falling off, so I got the ladder and screwed it back on.”

“Oh, thank you so much Amber!” Haseul chirps appreciatively. “You're a gem.”

The janitor nods curtly, and Haseul wishes her a “Take care now!” before leaving the girls locker

room and heading to her office to complete her paperwork.

As Haseul takes her first spears at her Trader Joe's salad, she clicks around on her desktop computer to choose her entertainment for lunch today.

What should she watch? She could get back to her usual favorites: the Wendy Williams Show, America's Funniest Home Videos, Family Feud, reruns of the news, etc. But nothing of the sort seemed to tickle her fancy.

She takes bites of her salad in the empty office, silent as she reflects on her day so far. The only person she's conversed with today other than her own daughter was Amber. That's right, about those security cameras.

Security cameras.

A security camera, outside the girls' locker room. This whole time!

And even more security cameras throughout the school, the principal noticed as she did her rounds.

In addition to forgetting they had cameras in the first place, she didn't even think they would be working. However, Haseul wonders if there is one in the gym.

The gym.

Scrambling to open the dated software, Haseul rustles through her drawers hurriedly for the permanent record of Hyejoo Ha. She enters the incident report's date into her computer, as the grids of security footage flashes into view.

Sure enough, the cameras were in perfect condition and had recorded everything. Even on a date that's seared into her brain.

November 10th, 2019.

Haseul slowly scrubs the time, peering through each of the squares of footage that play at accelerated speed. Students traverse the halls normally, heading to their next class.

In the bottom right corner of the footage grid, Haseul spots Hyejoo Ha exiting from the locker room with Yeojin and Chaewon. Together they enter the gym.

Haseul's heart begins to race as she verifies the time stamp with the pink incident report on her desk. This was the day she had suspended Hyejoo, for without a doubt the most violent outrage the school had ever seen.

What was Yeojin doing? Where was Coach Wonho during all of this?

And *why*?

All of the questions in the principal's head swarm to the forefront, as she anxiously watches a crowd of girls enter into the gym minutes after her own daughter. The crowd is nearly all the girls in the class, led by Nayeon Park.

A minute or so later, Choerry Kim enters the gym alone.

The security footage only shows the glass window of the gym door, giving a clear enough view of the classroom. The students line up at the center as Coach Wonho appears to deliver instructions. Haseul accelerates the video's speed.

The children congregate into their sides for dodgeball. Suddenly, Coach Wonho sprints out of the gym clutching his stomach.

Haseul clicks to slow down the footage.

She pauses for a moment, unsure if she can bear to watch. The Has' only daughter pummeling nearly all the other kids with dodgeballs is not exactly her idea of entertainment.

But she has to know what happened.

Through her limited view through the glass window, Haseul squints to make out the identities of the children.

Her heart drops to her stomach when she sees the students begin to organize, with one girl left in the center.

Nayeon appears to orchestrate an entire attack on *Chaewon*, *Chaewon Wong*, the smallest and most frail student in the entire class.

The footage has no sound, but Haseul can just barely see Yeojin thrashes violently by the bleachers as larger children bind her arms.

The principal is filled with unadulterated rage, but her heart stops as dodgeballs begin cannon at Chaewon's head, back, and legs as she curls into a fetal position on the floor. Haseul puts a hand to her gaping mouth, frozen in shock as the noiseless footage rolls.

Haseul takes a sharp breath as she watches Chaewon cry, sprawled out on the gym floor.

Suddenly, Hyejoo enters the limited frame of the gym window, lifting red balls from the floor only to shoot them at the other students who attacked Chaewon. One by one, they drop the floor writhing in pain from the sheer force. Chaewon is still clutching her head, as if the onslaught is yet to resume.

Hyejoo angrily beats them down, one by one, then drops the ball to punch a girl square in the face. When she falls to the floor, Haseul's eyes widen as she recognizes her again as Nayeon Park. Hyejoo drops to the floor and continues to beat down the girl with her fists.

It's one of the most violent things Haseul has ever witnessed.

Nayeon Park had sat in this office. She had insisted, *insisted* that it was Hyejoo Ha was out to bully all of them, that she had incited the violence within the gym. She had sat in that chair and begged the principal to expel Hyejoo.

But from what Haseul just watched, Nayeon seemed to be responsible for it all.

She cannot even imagine what she would do if Yeojin were the target.

Haseul's stomach drops remembering who she will inevitably have to deliver this news to.

What was she supposed to tell Vivi?

What now?

Chapter End Notes

!!! next chapter is a favorite since day 0 :))))
stay tuned for ch15: choerry's birthday bash

what did you think? what made you FEEL! leave a comment below here on ao3 or
send messages <3
curiouscat.me/catmsdqna

Choerry's Birthday Bash

Chapter Notes

special shoutouts to phai and leslie, we love you both always

READ-ALONG PLAYLIST:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4zf4VGhtovm34HyIGk6ZfX?si=z8QQV2I8Ty2pntncY4yj2w>

(set songs to repeat and skip at the *** scene dividers)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*As Jiwoo preps the set of her newest YouTube video (“ **ASMR: home invasion - i’m a demon who wants to slice off your face** ”), a five-year-old Hyejoo quietly tugs at her mother’s shirt.*

“Yes sweetie?” Jiwoo asks, immediately setting down her demon mask. “What is it?”

“I wanna go see Mama,” the child says. Hyejoo has that signature pout that she still keeps to this day, and those wide, wanting eyes she’s since grown out of.

Jiwoo melts in endearment. “I wanna see Mama too, but Mama’s at work,” she replies gently, tucking Hyejoo’s thick black hair behind her ear.

“I wanna go see her at work,” Hyejoo insists, pleading with her eyes.

Jiwoo almost says no, but Hyejoo only looks at her this way when she really wants something, enough to ask for it. It’s not very often.

Jiwoo takes her daughter’s hand and smiles.

The two of them spot Sooyoung at Saint Laurent’s Beverly Hills headquarters, on the penthouse floor. The CEO is turning over documents behind the glass walls of her exorbitantly large office.

Hyejoo runs to the glass wall in excitement. Instead of entering, she peers in with her big eyes and longing stare, like a homeless person outside a five-star restaurant. She shyly presses her hand flat on the glass (her other, clutching her wolf plushie) as she watches her mother work.

When Sooyoung notices, she jumps from her seat extremely startled. “Jesus-” she curses into her covered mouth, before laughing it off in incredulity. “Hyejoo?” she mouths. “What are you doing here?”

Jiwoo comes into sight behind her, waving and smiling at her wife with all the warmth in the world. Hyejoo invites herself into the gigantic penthouse office, scurrying inside. Sooyoung knows there is no one else in the world she would be happier to see than the two of them.

“Hi,” Jiwoo chirps. Sooyoung rises from her dark desk to meet them both. “We missed you too much!” she grins.

Sooyoung smiles lovingly, and looks down at their five-year-old. Hyejoo nods silently, hugging the wolf plushie to her face as if hiding behind it. Sooyoung beams at her hesitant daughter. It must have been Jiwoo's idea, she figures.

Sooyoung takes a knee, meeting her daughter at eye-level. "Thank you for visiting me," she whispers gingerly. "I have to run to a meeting in a minute, but this has made me very happy."

Their daughter nods into her wolf.

Sooyoung leans forward to plant a kiss on the child's forehead. "Alright," she stands up, but Hyejoo clings to her mother's legs.

"Hyejoo," Jiwoo calls sternly. "Let go."

Hyejoo listens, and backs off.

"You two can stay in here for as long as you want," Sooyoung adds, then gathers reports to take to the conference room. "I love you," she says to Jiwoo, kissing her once more. Then, she ruffles their daughter's hair a bit. "I will see you both later."

When Sooyoung leaves, Jiwoo watches her go.

For the first time since they entered the building, Hyejoo smiles.

Dog Ha, the youngest member of the Ha family, barks at Sooyoung's feet.

The orange labradoodle sits atop the guest bed yapping away. He invited himself in, after Sooyoung overslept a bit and neglected to take him out on time for his morning poop. (It's not her fault she can't sleep until the sun starts to come up. Plus, walking Dog was Jiwoo's job before she left.)

She groans as she slowly lifts herself.

Sooyoung leashes him up downstairs, then walks him through the brisk cold air of the mansion's courtyard. Birds chirp through the morning air with a fervor unparalleled.

It's only a few seconds before Dog awkwardly curls into himself for a poop.

The pup stares at Sooyoung the whole time. Which is a sign of trust, the Petsmart employee had assured the mother, when Dog elected to shit right in the middle of the store.

"Good boy," Sooyoung says awkwardly, as she squats to pick up the poop through a flimsy plastic bag.

Eventually, the two walk down to the mailbox for the Ha's filtered mail. A periwinkle envelope reads in small print:

From the Residence of Jinsol and Jungeun Kim

FrOm tHe ReSiDeNcE oF JiNsOl aNd JuNgEuN kIM, Sooyoung mocks internally with an eye roll.

On the other side though, it is clearly addressed: **HYEJOO HA**

She claws through the wax seal, nosy. After all, it wouldn't be the first time she has had an

unpleasant experience opening the mail.

On one side in beautiful printed calligraphy:

YOU ARE INVITED TO:

CHOERRY KIM's 14th BIRTHDAY BASH

Sooyoung exhales in relief as she notes their address plastered below.

On the other side of the invite is an absolutely God-awful drawing of a purple-haired stick figure with two mothers that Choerry presumably drew herself.

¡MERRY QUINCEANERA!

Sooyoung squints. ¿*Quinceañera*?

“Choerry, do you know what quince means?” Jungeun asks her daughter in puzzlement, after seeing one of the leftover invites that have already all been mailed out.

“Yes, it means fourteenth birthday!” Choerry responds with a big grin from the dining table.

Jungeun stares back at her.

“Jinsol,” she calls, walking towards the living room, where Jinsol is watching yet another humpback whale documentary on Disney+. “Do you know what quince means?”

“Yes,” she turns to her wife, with the same clueless grin. “What?”

“I thought you told me you speak Spanish.” Jungeun squints. “You told me that on our first date.”

Jinsol's eyes widen. It may have been the only lie she's ever told Jungeun, a white lie just to impress her. But, it wasn't a lie for long, considering that Jinsol spent months afterward learning conversational Spanish in secret to rectify it.

“Yo hablo... español.” Jinsol sputters fearfully.

(Years ago.)

Jungeun squints. “Entonces sabrías que quince no significa cumpleaños catorce.”

Jinsol just squints back, as if trying to do computations in her brain. “Uh, slower, por favor-”

“Choerry is turning *fourteen*,” Jungeun whispers, so her daughter doesn't overhear her from the kitchen. “The word quince means fifteen!”

“*Ohhh!*” Jinsol whispers back. “Well yes, I know but Choerry told me it was the perfect word for her birthday. She really likes that word. Says it's pretty like us.”

“Why did you give her *false information*?”

“Why are we whispering so loudly!” Jinsol replies. “Just walk closer to me!”

Jungeun huffs and takes steps closer to the back of the couch. “I know you helped her make those

invitations and they look beautiful, honey, but those invites just went out to all the guests and they think she's turning fifteen instead of fourteen!"

Jinsol looks puzzled. "I thought you helped her with the invitations."

Jungeun blinks. "I did not."

"Well, must have been one of her friends that gave her that idea then? I think she mentioned she has a friend that is learning Spanish."

Jungeun furrows her eyebrows. "Which friend?"

"Alright I'm talking hot moms, hot dentists, geishas, female priests-"

"Women aren't allowed to be priests! I would know, I've tried." Haseul corrects her daughter from the hallway, thinking about how she wanted to be Father Alfred's permanent replacement when he was hit by a car.

Yejin rolls her eyes and sighs. The eighth grader is in the middle of recording an Instagram live as @LILPENI\$.

"Nuns! Whatever! I don't care! Everyone is invited to my best friend's birthday party. She's rich so you know it's gonna be lit. There are gonna be celebrities, TRUST. It's gonna be on SATURDAY! THIS SATURDAY! SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA! DM me for the addy!"

"I don't think that's safe honey." Haseul chimes in again.

Yejin mutes herself and then turns to her mother.

"Mom. I told you, only speak in my live if it's intelligent. For you that is almost never. Are you feeling intelligent?"

"Well, I don't know about that, but I *am* feeling this blanket I just took out of the laundry! I just love it when it's fresh out of the dry-" Haseul gets cut off as Yeojin slams her bedroom door closed with her foot.

The principal phone chimes in her pocket. She fishes for it with one hand.

Vivi: Haseul! How's it going :) Ready for work tomorrow?

Haseul feels like her battery has been fully recharged, as a manic smile grows on her face.

Haseul: Hi!

Haseul: Missed you! :)))

Haseul:

Haseul is red, but quickly begins to pale as she remembers she still has yet to inform Vivi of the bullying she had witnessed on the security cameras.

She hadn't waited a single day to take disciplinary action against Nayeon Park, though. Even though it was still Spring Break, Haseul called in both Nayeon's parents and the student herself. The paperwork had already been filled out. Nayeon was immediately expelled from St. Jihyo's

Presidential Academy, and was given a referral to Los Angeles' Juvenile Detention Center.

The other children that Haseul was able to identify were given suspensions for two weeks. Hyejoo Ha's disciplinary record was cleared.

The next step was to speak to Vivi, which was the hardest of them all. So hard, in fact, that Haseul had horribly put it off. How would she even deliver that kind of information? *Hello, your beloved only child was beaten to a pulp in gym class months ago and I just now found out?* After all, it didn't seem that Vivi had any idea that Chaewon had been physically bullied. But after Haseul recalls seeing Chaewon wearing the same giant black Balenciaga sweater and long pants for weeks, undoubtedly covering 93% of her skin every day, it began to make more sense.

Instead of talking to Vivi first, Haseul had sat her own daughter down. She informed Yeojin that she had seen the footage, and calmly asked why Yeojin didn't tell her. (Haseul tries to encourage the most transparent relationship between herself and the students. After all, she makes them all address her by Principal Haseul, not Dr. Jo.) For her daughter to witness this all firsthand and not say anything to her...

Yeojin apologized sincerely, saying that Chaewon made them promise to not let the information get to her mother. She didn't want to put her under the stress.

Which makes Haseul's ordeal even *more* difficult. How is she supposed to approach Vivi? As a coworker? A friend? A parent of a student? There are too many conflicts of interest, but there is no one else who can deliver the news other than Principal Haseul herself.

A text interrupts Haseul's anxious train of thought.

Vivi: I missed you too! :) <3 Can't wait to see you.

Haseul is so startled from the heart emoticon that she drops the laundry basket on her bare feet, spilling all the contents on the floor. The principal runs a hand over her face.

Vivi Wong's thin eyebrows furrow at her phone screen. *Was the heart too much?* She begins to panic, overcome with the sudden fear of being exposed.

Her heart sinks. The teacher continues sifting through the mail she collected earlier. In between the grocery store coupons and department store ads, an ornate periwinkle envelope sticks out like a sore thumb.

Chaewon Wong

Vivi knocks at her daughter's door. "Chaewon," she calls softly. "You got something in the mail. Looks like... an invitation?"

Chaewon doesn't respond. She hears her though. The eighth grader is just too busy being sad, distracting herself with video games.

The blonde clicks away with her dead eyes trained to her computer screen. She has sent Hyejoo so many text messages, yet Hyejoo has replied only once:

Hyejoo: Leave me alone

Chaewon has been awfully sad all throughout Spring Break, and that text only made it worse. Vivi was definitely worried.... especially since Chaewon was barely eating her meals.

Vivi sucks in her lips, feeling her heart fall. "I'm going to just slide it under your door, okay?" She doesn't want to overstep.

"Okay." Chaewon replies lifelessly.

"Okay," Vivi says back. "Please come down for dinner soon?"

There is an aching silence for a few seconds. "Okay."

"Okay. I love you."

"I know. Love you too." Chaewon says back.

Vivi gently leans her head on the door, crestfallen.

Irene Kang narrows her eyes at the sealed invitation addressed to her daughter. Her pale hand clasps the knob of the giant warehouse door, and she invites herself in.

"Yeri!" Irene calls, squinting for the blinding white light of the warehouse. "You have something in the mail from Choerry Kim."

Irene surveys the empty space for her daughter. Yeri's warehouse, a gutted Costco building relocated to the Kang property, is where the girl spends most of her time. Irene and Seulgi had got Yeri the warehouse so she could take on her current hyperfixation outside of the family living space. It allows Irene to maintain some fragment of peace in her home.

All of a sudden, Yeri swoops down mid-air and snatches the invitation out of Irene's hands. Irene shrieks.

Yeri swings away on the aerial curtains (last month's hobby), past the indoor hot tub and straight into the Ariana Grande themed bouncy house.

She crawls on all fours over Ariana's inflated body, like King Kong on the statue of liberty. The invite is secured between her teeth.

"Yeri!" Irene screams. "What in the world!"

"Thank you," Yeri says nonchalantly.

"Get down from there!"

"You are dismissed, Mother," she says calmly as she rips through the invitation with a grin.

Irene narrows her eyes. "Remember your curfew!" she snaps.

"Mmm," Yeri mumbles back. She has to be back in the house by 8pm.

(Irene had to set time restrictions. Parental controls, if you will. Yeri had only been coming home to rummage through the fridge like a rat.)

When Irene has already slid the giant metal warehouse door shut, Yeri squeals. "Quinceañera!"

“No, like the dude was *on* the horse. Like surfing, but on its head. Then out of nowhere a seagull tried to take his KFC bucket and he punched it.”

Hyunjin laughs, pulling out a large textbook from her locker and the sound makes Heejin feel like she’s walking on air.

The next day is St. Jihyo’s first day back from Spring Break, as well as Dalla High’s.

The artsy skateboarder had realized quite a few things over her spring break, after not being able to get the soccer player off her mind the entire time she was in Florida. The first was that Florida is the devil’s armpit. But the second realization, and most important one by far:

There was no one on Earth that gave Heejin the giddy rush that Hyunjin did. The thought of her alone over the break was enough to give her butterflies. Why?! They weren’t even *TOGETHER!*

But even as kids, Heejin knew that there was something that made Hyunjin her *person*. It was like they were made for each other, and Heejin was pretty sure the other girl still felt the same.

And after a year of not speaking to each other, the artist was finally starting to see a chance to spend more time with the one person she loves the most. The possibility of getting a redo with her was *not* something she was about to pass up.

So she had elected to be bolder, *much* bolder, about talking to Hyunjin once she got back to California. Sure, avoiding Lia’s dagger eyes required her to only be bold at certain time periods, but she thought it was worth the effort. Especially when Lia wasn’t even her girlfriend.

Plus, they were just having a conversation. It’s not like they were *flirting*, or anything...

“Oh, I got something for you by the way.” Heejin says, shrugging her bookbag off her shoulder and pulling out a small box.

“What?!” Hyunjin said, putting the books back down in her locker to take the box from the other girl. “You shouldn’t have!” she says nervously. Heejin laughs, but Hyunjin means it... the stress from this situation is really starting to pile up.

The soccer player opens the container to reveal a pair of glassy white earrings in the shape of seashells. *Simple but beautiful, just the way Hyunjin likes them.*

“I saw them and I thought of you.” Heejin says, and Hyunjin’s cheeks turn bright pink.

Ok, maybe Heejin *was* flirting, but it’s not like she could help it at this point. The soccer captain just made her heart beat so incredibly fast that there was no denying it anymore. Plus, what’s that thing they always say? Live every day like it’s your last?

“Oh, wow.” Hyunjin stands in awe, feeling the heat rise in her face.

“Try them on!” Heejin encourages, and the other girl nods happily, spinning around to look in the mirror stuck to her locker door. After a moment she turns back around, pushing her hair behind her ears and modelling for the girl in front of her.

“Like what you see?” Hyunjin asks, a little too flirtatiously than she initially meant. “I mean like, the earrings obviously! HA! Haha...”

“How could I not?” Heejin responds boldly, knowing exactly how it’s coming out. As Hyunjin’s ears grow red, Heejin also notices one of the earrings is tilted slightly to the side. She knows she shouldn’t because of the circumstances, but feeling an irresistible urge to fix the shell, tilts it back upright.

“Perfect.” Heejin says, a little too close, allowing the other girl to breathe in her signature scent of freshly baked cookies. There was no way for Hyunjin to *not* freak out in the middle of the hallway where literally everyone could see...

“HYUNJIN, HEEJIN!” A loud shout shatters the tension between the two girls, the friends breaking apart, and Hyunjin nearly slamming into the lockers. They see the one and only St. Jihyo’s Principal walking towards them waving frantically. Hyunjin makes a mental note to thank the woman for interrupting them later.

“Principal Haseul! What are you doing here?” Heejin asks, feeling her face grow red from whatever position the woman may or may not have just seen the two girls in.

“Hyunjin! Hyunjin hyunjin bo boonjiin banana fana bo boonjin...” Haseul sings, while bobbing her entire body to the beat. “Heejin! Heejin... Sorry Heejin I don’t think anything rhymes with your name!”

“None of what you said rhymed with Hyunjin.” Heejin says in the kindest way possible, trying her best not to laugh.

“Well...” Haseul starts.

She never finishes. There are about three seconds of awkward silence.

“I actually came here to drop off some paperwork in the office for you both! My little assistants!” Haseul chirps, a little more perky than usual. “There’s been a change of plans with your duties...”

“Oh? What’s the change?” Hyunjin asks, wanting to elongate the conversation as much as possible. There was no way she could go back to just talking to Heejin after the panic that had just overtaken her moments ago.

“Well since I’m here I might as well just tell you!” Haseul says. “So you know how you were supposed to come up with an event? Well we scrapped that because, long story short, our PTA president seems rather stressed lately.”

That was a very watered down version of what actually happened. Irene had entered Haseul’s office that day and left completely unhinged, mumbling like a paranoid psych ward patient and breaking pencils in half. She is very upset about having to coordinate *and* execute every event alone.

“I WILL MAKE THE CAFETERIA STOP SERVING THE HOT CHEETO FRIED CORN DOGS ON FRIDAYS IF I HAVE TO KEEP DOING THIS ALONE!!!” Haseul shudders at the thought of the PTA president’s threat coming true.

“You both are now in charge of the Summer Carnival!” Haseul says, giving them both a thumbs up. “The SummerFest happens after eighth grade graduation! It’s the best event St. Jihyo’s puts on!” This is completely false (Field Day wins by a long shot). “Your job is to make it fun! And make sure no one’s hand gets jammed in the ferris wheel again!” she laughs nervously.

“Aw the poor kid!” Heejin says, her bottom lip sticking out in a sad pout.

“Yeah,” Haseul lies. It was Seulgi. She wanted to make sure it was working. “But this is definitely one of the biggest events of the school year! This is a great responsibility, so I’m counting on you!”

“That sounds fun!” Heejin says, turning to Hyunjin with sparkling eyes. They both will sure have a lot to put on their resume when this is over.

Hyunjin nods, quickly forcing her attention away from Heejin back to their boss. Why did she have to be so cute?

“YES!” Haseul screams, startling some high schoolers walking past. “And judging on how well you do, we might just offer you a full-time teaching job at St. Jihyo’s!”

“What, really?” Hyunjin asks, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“No!” Haseul grins. “I was just kidding. But we will be giving both of you some gift cards to Red Lobster! You could go together, like on a little date!” The principal says, completely oblivious to the awkwardness she has just caused.

“*Oh um*, we’re not technically like-”

“If you tell them you’re on a friend-date you get a free lobster. Trust me. I know all the hacks.” Haseul winks, making both high schoolers look at each other and laugh. Haseul looks at her watch and her eyes widen.

“Shoot, I better get going. OH! Hold on Hyunjin I have something for you.” Heejin makes eye contact with Hyunjin, raising an eyebrow and the other girl just shrugs, not knowing what her boss was about to give her.

The older woman pulls out a small purple invitation and holds it out for Hyunjin to take.

“I told Choerry Kim that I would give this to you! She heard I was coming to your school and handed it off to me after this morning’s announcements. See you guys tomorrow!” Haseul says before saluting them both and disappearing into the crowd of teenagers.

Hyunjin reads the birthday (quince?!? Isn’t Choerry turning 14?) invite and Heejin does the same, a little too curious as to what it is. Hyunjin doesn’t stop her, but wishes she had once she sees a small note written in ink on the bottom of the page.

DON’T FORGET TO BRING A DATE! ☺

It was clearly added only to *her* invite, in Choerry’s neat purple gel-pen handwriting, and Hyunjin swears these kids were born to make her life a mess.

“So you have to bring a date?” Heejin asks, wriggling her eyebrows playfully.

“A date to what?”

The voice knocks the playful energy right out of Heejin’s body as both girls look up from the purple card to see Lia staring at both of them blankly.

“H-HEY!” Hyunjin yells nervously. Lia continues to stare daggers into Heejin’s face until the artist distances herself a little more from their mutual crush. Lia turns her attention to the soccer player and her demeanor changed completely, a bright smile plastered on her face.

Heejin does everything she can not to groan. She knows she had no right to be jealous. but Heejin

was trying not to push down her feelings so much after all.

“Can I see?” Lia asks looking at the card and Hyunjin obliges, passing it over and letting their hands linger on each other much too long for Heejin’s liking.

“Oh no! The party is on Saturday... I have a cheer competition super early the next day so I don’t think I can come with you,” the head cheerleader pouts, clinging to Hyunjin’s arm possessively.

Heejin feels a smirk forming on her face, but she keeps it under control.

“I mean. I’m free Saturday. It could be like a friend-date, obviously.” Heejin references their boss’s words from earlier and Hyunjin tries not to giggle and throw up at the same time. She doesn’t think she has ever been under more stress in her life. And she was in three nose soccer ball juggling competitions (Don’t even ask.)

Lia’s jaw clearly clenches. The cheerleader turns her attention back to Hyunjin, intertwining their fingers. “You know actually, I don’t mind being a little sleepy for a competition if it means hanging out all night with you.”

Heejin wants to roll her eyes so hard that they fall back into her head, but she resists. “Oh you don’t have to do that, being tired while doing stunts can’t be safe!”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m capable of making the right decision for myself Heejin. I wouldn’t expect you to understand, given your romantic history and all.”

Hyunjin’s eyes widen at the sudden jab, and Heejin’s confidence falters immediately.

“I’M ACTUALLY ALREADY TAKING SOMEONE!” Hyunjin shouts, making both girls look at her in confusion. “Um, yeah I already have someone coming with me... We planned it already, so.”

Heejin sends her a look of confusion. “Didn’t you just get that invitation though?”

“Y- Yes but! But, I already knew... the kids were going to give me this invite and they wanted me to invite a specific person. A person that they know...” Hyunjin nods frantically, trying to make this completely made up story seem convincing.

“Who?” Lia asks, letting go of Hyunjin’s hand to cross her arms. Heejin looks at her expectantly as well.

Hyunjin looks around the hallway in hopes of seeing quite literally anyone that she knew. Unfortunately she does see someone recognizable heading in her direction right this second.

Was she really that desperate?

Hyunjin looks back at her classmates. Lia raises an eyebrow while Heejin just looks like a lost puppy.

Yes, she is that desperate.

Before the person can pass them, Hyunjin reaches out and grabs the arm of a tall pink haired boy that is completely caught off guard.

“Him.” Hyunjin says pointing at the guy who looks like the personification of a computer buffering. “Yunho is going to be my friend-date!”

“We’re friends?” Yunho says, a wide smile growing on his face as he looks down at the lesbian

soccer captain, who is sending him a look practically begging him to play along with the lies she's telling.

"Yeah of course! We planned to go to the kid's party together right because..." Hyunjin tries to think of anything that makes sense.

"Because I like cake!" Yunho says, winking at Hyunjin as if he has just saved the day.

"Right." Hyunjin says, teeth gritted. "It's a special cake. That he likes. And the kids know he likes it because they know him from..."

"Sky Zone." Yunho says, once again very proud of himself. "I work there and they like me."

"Exactly." Hyunjin says. "So they wrote bring a date on the invite because. They know we go to the same school and are friends. So we're going together! Haha we have to go to class now ok bye!"

Hyunjin closes her locker leaving her books inside, but too terrified to even turn back around. She drags Yunho away from the other two girls as well, but he waves politely at both of them as they walk together down the hall.

Heejin and Lia are nearly specks in the distance when Hyunjin and Yunho finally stop walking.

"Thanks for backing me up." Hyunjin says, releasing the boy from her grasp.

"Of course, that's what friends are for! I mean I didn't know we were friends since you only ran me over that one time but I love hanging out with new people!" Yunho insists.

Hyunjin has to give the boy credit for being so upbeat all the time.

"So we're going to a party!" Yunho says mouth opened with a big smile. Hyunjin stares back up at him with a blank expression.

"No. We are not going anywhere. I just said that because I needed to get out of that situation." Hyunjin says, sighing a breath of relief.

"Why? Are they bullying you? I can take them if you want. I'm not a fighter but I am pretty tall and if I stretch my arms out I can keep them away from you." Yunho says, holding out his arms for proof.

Hyunjin squints her eyes and then drags her hands down her face. "No. They just. It's a complicated history."

"I love History. I'm actually thinking about majoring in it, it's how I'm trying to pick out which college I'm apply-"

"NOT-" Hyunjin looks around and lowers her voice before continuing. "Not that kind of history. Like just. A romantic history kind of." Hyunjin whispers.

"OOOOOO." Yunho says a little too loudly, much like Hyunjin but his deeper voice makes his understanding even more apparent to those around him. "You have two girlfriends?!"

"No!" Hyunjin snaps, guilt overcoming her from Yunho's choice of words. "It's just really complicated ok? I don't think going to this party with either of them would've helped it be any

easier.”

Hyunjin rubs her temples and Yunho tilts his head. He’s never really seen anyone this stressed before. Sometimes he watched his mom do her own taxes though and this seemed very similar to that.

“Well that’s even more of a reason I should go with you!” Yunho says, hitting Hyunjin on the arm playfully. “I do really work at Sky Zone which means I can secure a gift card so you don’t have to worry about presents! Plus you seem like you need a party without worrying about girls. That’s why my mom goes out during tax season. Well she’s not a lesbian but still!”

Hyunjin has no idea why this giant in front of her is talking about his mother or tax season, but he does make a good point about having a fun night without thinking about girls.

“Alright.” Hyunjin says. “I guess... we can go. I would feel less guilty about lying if it wasn’t actually a lie.”

“YES!” Yunho shouts, and Hyunjin punches him on the shoulder, making him grab it in pain.

“Damn, you have a strong arm. That hurt more than when you hit me with your car.” Yunho pouts.

Hyunjin sighs. “Sorry, just stop being so loud!”

It’s silent for a moment but both of them start laughing. They turn to continue walking down the hallway and Yunho looks down at his new friend.

“So what kind of cake will be there exactly?”

Sooyoung Ha has always taken homework very seriously. From her youth to her career, she always completed assignments promptly and diligently. The executive was never one to put things off.

But she was most definitely procrastinating the homework that her therapist had given her.

She stares at Hyejoo now, sitting at a luxurious coffee table in the living room and on one of her many laptops. The eighth grader is unaware that her mother has been staring at her for the past ten minutes straight.

Sooyoung has no idea how to go about initiating their medically-prescribed hug. It’s almost time for her next appointment with Tzuyu, and the CEO had a feeling she shouldn’t come back empty handed. *Again.*

She could just *ask* her daughter if she wanted a hug. But, oh Lord, how insurmountably difficult that would be. Sooyoung can barely ask Hyejoo how to make a Bagel Bite. (Yes, Sooyoung still needed assistance despite the instructions being written on the box. What the hell is a “crisping tray”?!)

Not the mention that asking the question would *certainly* yield a vehement “No.”

Sooyoung contemplates holding something over her. Perhaps a bribe. “*We can get ice cream if we hug for at least twelve minutes straight.*”

She frowns. Although it would be easier, it seems antithetical to what they need.

She just wishes this wasn’t so difficult. After all, she’s always been bad with rejection.

Hyejoo clears her throat from the coffee table, then gets up to walk to the kitchen.

Sooyoung, to avoid looking creepy, walks toward Hyejoo in a panic.

Hyejoo thinks her mother is just walking past until Sooyoung, without warning, swoops downward like a vulture for a very awkward hug.

“AAH!” Hyejoo exclaims. “What the fuck!” She is trapped awkwardly between a very insecure Sooyoung’s arms.

“My therapy homework is to hug you, please help,” Sooyoung stammers, attempting to hug her daughter again, but the child dodges her mother’s arms.

“The-” Hyejoo stares at her mother like she’s insane. “...So you only want to be nice to be when it’s for homework,” the child snaps bitterly.

“NO.” Sooyoung shouts back. Then she sighs, facepalming. “N-No! I just... don’t know how to approach you.”

Hyejoo squints. “What, am I scary?”

“Am *I* scary?” Sooyoung counters defensively.

Hyejoo just narrows her eyes. “...Touché.”

Sooyoung scratches her head. “Well. It’s that therapist I told you about. She’s really quite good. You could see her t-”

“I don’t *want* to talk to anyone.” Hyejoo practically growls. Sooyoung sighs; that’s exactly what her daughter said the first time she made the suggestion.

“Well. I’m sorry I sprung up on you just now,” Sooyoung is red, almost stuttering. “I panicked. But if you want, it’s supposed to be really good for the both of us. For... Our brains.”

Hyejoo crinkles her eyebrows in confusion.

“You know. Mental health.” Sooyoung says stiffly.

“Since when does mental health matter to *you*?”

“Since I began realizing mine affects my family’s, and that’s important to me.” Sooyoung snaps back honestly.

Hyejoo narrows her eyes at her mother.

“I don’t *want* to hug you.” Hyejoo scowls at her mother.

Sooyoung just looks off into the distance and sighs. She’s practically numb to it at this point.

“Okay.” Sooyoung says. Dejected, she bites the inside of her lip to prevent herself from falling into a deep pit of maternal despair. “Oh- Here,” Sooyoung reaches for the opened party envelope on one of the clear coffee tables. “You got an invite to Choerry’s birthday party on Saturday.”

Hyejoo does not look pleased. She takes the invite, examines it, then- “You opened mail that was addressed for *me*?”

Sooyoung's eyes widen. She hadn't even thought of how Hyejoo might have taken that, even though it was primarily for safety concerns. "Well- Uhm- Yes. I'm your mother and you're a minor, so."

"So that means you can invade my privacy?" Hyejoo responds angrily. "I don't think your therapist would be happy to hear that," the thirteen year-old snaps.

Sooyoung flares defensively, then takes a pause to collect herself.

She tests out one of the techniques Tzuyu had given her for anger management. The CEO shuts her eyes and begins to inhale deeply and dramatically.

What the fuck? Hyejoo thinks, squinting at her mother.

"PTSD has been linked to aggressive outbursts. Depressive disorders also can cause irritability and may make it more difficult to manage anger." Tzuyu had told Sooyoung last week, drawing on her connection between the behaviors of the CEO and her daughter. Tzuyu had even given Sooyoung some books to keep her busy, so she wouldn't just ruminate on Jiwoo and cry in her room. The stack of books included, but was not limited to: *So You Think You Have Trauma*, *Parenting With PTSD*, and *I Want To Stop Being a Shitty Parent*.

"What are you doing," Hyejoo mutters.

Sooyoung opens her eyes slowly. "I am sorry for crossing your boundaries," she says carefully.

Hyejoo looks nervous. "...Are you possessed?"

"No. I. Erm. Here you go." Sooyoung hands her daughter the envelope.

Hyejoo eyes her suspiciously, then takes the envelope. Her eyes gloss over the invite.

"Mom is doing okay," Hyejoo says, her eyes still looking down at the paper. "I figured you would ask."

"I-" Sooyoung starts. *Doing okay. Doing okay without her. Doing okay living apart.* "I wasn't going to ask you."

Hyejoo's eyes perk up in alarm.

"Not that- Not that I don't care. Or that I don't miss her. I do. All the time. Always. But I wouldn't want to put that on you. To be a messenger." Sooyoung sputters.

Hyejoo says nothing as she looks back down to the paper sullenly.

"Are you thinking about going?" Sooyoung changes the subject to avoid her own pain. "To Choerry's party?"

"No." Hyejoo says immediately. "I don't want to." The angry child hands the invite back to her mother, then walks away, bounding up the stairs back to her room and ignoring her open laptop on the coffee table.

Sooyoung sighs.

Far past Hyejoo's bedtime, Sooyoung is glued to the couch watching television.

Sorry, correction: Sooyoung is glued to Haseul, on the couch, watching television.

The principal (Sooyoung's only real human companion) initially came over to assist the CEO with some Bagel Bites. After all, Haseul had extensive expertise with the frozen food's sister product, Totino's. Sooyoung had emailed the principal through her work address (**jomama@stjihyos.edu**), since Haseul was the only person she knew would maybe be willing to help her. Haseul, ever cognizant of her work affairs, came over as soon as she could. *Yejin can handle being alone for a few hours!* Haseul thought to herself, as she overheard her sleeping daughter snoring like a trucker. (Of course, she texted the girl her whereabouts if Yejin happened to wake up.)

Sometime after Sooyoung had finished her burnt batch of Bagel Bites, the CEO suddenly burst into tears. There was just something about Haseul talking about the joys of being an underpaid American educator that made Sooyoung want to give up on life entirely.

Then, Sooyoung was oversharing *everything* from her childhood - the domestic abuse she had just begun disclosing to Tzuyu, the vice grip her parents still have on her, etcetera. It was an unhealed wound that Tzuyu tore open, and Sooyoung can't fix it back up anymore. She even shared that, in addition, she had hurt her wife's feelings so much that Jiwoo left home.

Haseul, gentle as a lamb, actually listened very intently as Sooyoung sobbed and nearly threw up on the carpet. The principal's motherly instincts caused her to get a blanket, even, just to swaddle Sooyoung in. She rocked her back and forth like an infant while some unimportant television program (that Haseul calls "Ghost Adventures") droned on.

"These ghosts aren't real," Sooyoung croaks in Haseul's lap. She sniffs hard for the millionth time, letting out decades of tears.

"But you know what ghosts are real? The ghosts of your past," Haseul chimes matter of factly.

"OH FUCK OFF!" Sooyoung screams horridly, crying even more into her hands.

"There there," Haseul coos. "But are you kidding me? Did you not see that orb in the background."

Sooyoung cries even harder, and Haseul panics.

"O-Okay, let's change the channel! How about that!" She fiddles with one of the many remotes, changing the channel to something she would watch at this time.

The TV flashes.

"Without further ado, it is my pleasure to introduce," Gordon Ramsay says to the cooking show contestants in his signature British accent. "One of the best pastry chefs of our time, with an even sweeter heart - Jiwoo Ha!"

Sooyoung freezes, and watches the TV with big eyes as her ever-beaming wife walks onto the stage.

"Oh God, I'm just gonna change it-" Haseul interrupts.

"NO!" Sooyoung shrieks. "NO DON'T!"

Haseul still moves to change the channel, but Sooyoung doesn't let her, screaming and clawing at her hands. The two mothers are fighting like children over the remote, while Sooyoung is starting to sob her eyes out and fall apart once again.

Haseul finally manages to turn the TV off, and Sooyoung is crying and screaming at the same time.

“Oh no! Poor monkey,” Haseul softens. Sooyoung’s crying does, indeed, remind her of a tiny animal. “It’ll be ok, Auntie Haseul is here” she coos while Sooyoung continues to wail. “Oh, do you want me to sing? I’ll sing you a little tune they taught us at the YMCA. *La cucaracha, la cucaracha-*”

Behind them, they hear something drop to the floor.

Turning around to face the darkness, Sooyoung and Haseul see Hyejoo staring in horror at them, her game controller dropped in shock. She stares at the two women, terrified. Her mother and her principal look very intimate.

And Hyejoo thinks they are having an affair.

“HI OLIVIA!” Haseul cheers with a big smile. “SAY HELLO TO YOUR NEW MOM!” she jokes.

Hyejoo’s eyes widen further in absolute terror, as do Sooyoung’s.

“...Kidding!” Haseul quips. “How is your night going sweetie?”

Hyejoo screams, *very loudly*, sprinting up the grand foyer back up to her room while Sooyoung stumbles off the couch after her.

“HYEJOO!” Sooyoung shouts, desperately trying to keep up with her daughter but failing.
“HYEJOO!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Hyejoo screams all the way up the stairs. “THIS IS A FUCKING NIGHTMARE!”

“Hyejoo please-” Sooyoung is out of breath as she dives to the floor, grabbing Hyejoo’s ankle.
“Please! Please don’t scream-”

“YOU’RE HAVING AN AFFAIR!?! THAT’S WHY MOM LEFT US!”

“NO!” Sooyoung shouts back, confused. “GOD- WHAT?! NO! I WOULD NEVER! NO! DISGUSTING!”

Haseul can be heard shouting from downstairs: “Well I wouldn’t say disgusting, I *have* been called hot before. By my doctor, with the thermometer, but,” she murmurs that last part.

“She’s-” Sooyoung snaps her eyes shut as she massages the bridge of her nose. “She’s my friend,” she hisses quietly.

“You don’t *have any* friends.” Hyejoo snaps mercilessly.

“What are you talking about? I have your mother, my therapist, you, and Haseul.”

“The first three definitely don’t count.” Hyejoo squints.

Haseul comes up the stairs into view. “FAMILY MEETING!” she grins, clearly getting a kick out of the joke. Hyejoo screams bloody murder once more. “Olivia sweetie, I hate to break it to you... But your mom and I are having an affair. It’s true. One of FRIENDSHIP!”

“GET OUT!” Sooyoung yells. “OUT HASEUL! YOU NEED TO LEAVE *NOW!*”

Haseul tuts. “Ah-ah ah! Now, what did your therapist tell you about inside voices?”

Hyejoo looks at her mother in confusion.

“Inside voice is my first choice,” Sooyoung mumbles in a quieter tone.

“Olivia, there is seriously no need to worry. Your mother and I are just buds. I was just talking her off the ledge.”

“ENOUGH!” Sooyoung snaps.

“You’re weird,” the eighth grader snaps at Haseul.

“Normal people scare me,” the principal responds. “I saw that on a shirt once at a Hot Topic. You’ve probably been there Olivia. It’s a little dark and spooky!”

Hyejoo facepalms.

Haseul grins, staring at 2/3rds of the Ha family. “Has anyone ever told you two that you look so alike?”

The next school day, Ms. Wong is doing paperwork at her desk, alone in her classroom.

Well, almost alone. She notices Hyejoo Ha in the corner of her eye, sitting at the far end of the classroom eating the school’s lunch. The eighth grader eats by herself, while the other students are playing outside. It’s the first day back at school after spring break.

Vivi steals glances at the child, fighting the temptation to talk to her. Hyejoo doesn’t like to talk, Vivi knows, and the best thing she can do for her right now is probably to let her eat in peace. So the art teacher stays quiet.

The school phone rings, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“Ms. Wong’s class,” she says airily into the phone.

“*Ello*,” Haseul says, in a horrible attempt at a British accent. Vivi snorts.

“Hi there,” she responds.

“*I am colling-*” Haseul struggles with maintaining the accent. “*How ah yew on this lovely- Okay I can’t do the accent anymore. Can you come to my office? I have to... talk to you.*” Haseul plays with the stray threads of her office chair in nervousness. She can’t keep putting off telling Vivi about the dodgeball incident.

Vivi’s heart begins to skip beats. *Talk* to her? Talk to her about what?

The fact that Vivi can never stop thinking about her?

“I would love to, but- Isn’t there a faculty meeting in five minutes?” Vivi asks. “That you’re hosting?”

“*Oh. Ugh. That’s right.*” Haseul sounds disappointed. It makes Vivi just a bit giddy, like a

schoolgirl. *“Okay. Later.. then. Sometime. Maybe after school.”*

“Oh, I can’t do afterschool, I have a ton of work to do with Heejin after my last art period today.”
Vivi says sweetly.

“Oh okay. Well,” the principal sighs. *“We’ll figure it out.”* Haseul smiles into the phone. *“Hey, remember when Yeojin made you laugh so hard at Texas Roadhouse that you spilled your Diet Coke?”*

Vivi grins, her heartbeat fluttering as she plays with the telephone wire. “I do... Why?”

“Oh nothing. Just some thoughts on the brain.”

“Alright,” the art teacher giggles quietly, in an attempt for Hyejoo to not hear her from across the room. An onlooker would think she were talking to her spouse. “I’ll talk to you soon-”

Babe. Vivi almost says it.

Panicked, she hangs up the phone.

The halls of St. Jihyo’s have quieted down as the student’s daily classes have ended. The remaining staff are outside manning crosswalks now, but Hyunjin is in the art room grabbing her lunch bag she had forgotten earlier.

“Ms. Hyunjin, you’re still here?”

The high schooler looks up to see Ms. Wong’s kind face entering her classroom. The woman was wearing more casual clothing than what she had on earlier, paint speckled in various spots on her shirt, arms and hands.

“Yeah, I don’t have practice today so I didn’t need to leave early.” Hyunjin remarks, referencing her usual schedule. She holds up her lunch bag that she had thrown in here after eating. “But I just came to get this, so I’ll be leaving now.”

Vivi smiles and nods, heading for some more acrylic paint bottles when she receives a ping on her phone.

Chaewon: hi... motherly figure

Chaewon: i forgot my house key can u bring me urs at west pick up gate

Chaewon: hurry plz mrs. scary kang is driving today and she might just leave me outside

Chaewon: i’m not trying to fight this woman in the afternoon

Chaewon: in the morning, maybe...

Vivi sighs and texts Chaewon a quick “Omw” back. Her daughter had been carpooling with Yeri home ever since her fall out with Hyejoo. Irene still does not know Chaewon’s name; she addresses her as ‘Yeri’s little friend’.

“See you later Ms. Wong!” Hyunjin says as she’s about to walk out of the classroom.

“Wait! Do you think you could take these to Heejin quickly for me? We’ve been redoing the east wing mural but I need to give my daughter something on the other side of the school.” The teacher asks.

Hyunjin’s stomach turns at the sound of her friend’s name. Heejin hadn’t let the events of the other day put her flirting at rest, and it seemed to be working in her favor. The girl had continued to be as sweet as before, and Hyunjin caught herself wanting to be around her more and more as time went on. But then the thought of Lia flashes into her mind as it always does, and she is filled with guilt once more. Hyunjin shakes it off and smiles at the teacher.

“Yeah!” She squeaks out, taking the bottles from Vivi.

“You’re a lifesaver!” The art teacher says before jogging out of the room, Hyunjin following behind her at a slower pace.

Heejin was carrying out her assistant responsibilities by retouching details on the mural outside of St. Jiho’s. Paint brushes and tin buckets filled with paint were scattered across the lawn and a ladder stands upright to reach the higher spaces on the mural.

Heejin is scanning the wall when she notices a smudged area on the top corner of the building. The girl knows she shouldn’t be on the ladder until Vivi comes back outside, but she lets her impatience get the better of her and climbs to the top.

As the girl is fixing a minor detail up, the ladder begins to wobble, and Heejin immediately panics, only to unsteady herself further. The ladder tilts, and the artist readies herself to hit the pavement, closing her eyes.

Only she doesn’t. Instead she’s looking up at Hyunjin, who has caught her and now has paint smudged on her face from the brush Heejin had been holding.

“Are you ok?” Hyunjin asks, slightly flustered at their proximity.

“Uh,” Heejin says, a little too distracted from the way Hyunjin’s arms are wrapped around her to form a coherent sentence. Hyunjin notices and quickly releases her, making Heejin stagger to keep her balance.

“I’m fine!” Heejin says, taking a breath. She can’t help but crack a smile once she sees Hyunjin’s newly decorated face. “I think I accidentally got some stuff on you though.”

Hyunjin runs a hand down her face and sees it covered with pink paint. Heejin starts laughing now, and the other girl looks up and playfully squints at her. “*Ohhhh*, so I save your life and you laugh at me?!”

Heejin continues to giggle and the soccer player decides to launch an attack. She stretches her arm out swiftly, causing the artist to have the paint smeared on her own face now. And so a paint war ensues.

The girls run around on the lawn, dipping their hands with paint and flinging it at each other, practically wrestling and rolling around like lovesick puppies.

Meanwhile, Hyejoo Ha stands near the school’s loading zone with her airpods in. The eighth grader waits impatiently for her ride home, as family SUVs file behind one another. Usually, Hyejoo is the first to be picked up - Eunseo’s tinted black town car is always in line early, followed

closely by Irene Kang's Escalade. But Eunseo is nowhere to be seen. *She must be late*, Hyejoo thinks.

Hyejoo turns the music up to a deafening volume as she attempts to drown out the sounds of her classmates around her. She shifts her body further into the field's alcove, hiding herself from view from Choerry, Yeojin, Chaewon, or Yeri.

She notices Heejin and Hyunjin are on campus today, currently rolling around on the ground looking very romantic. *I bet Lia wouldn't like that*, Hyejoo thinks to herself. Then again, it's none of her business. Her relationship with her babysitter is strictly limited to playing video games without any girl talk. *They're better together anyway*, Hyejoo thinks. She had always felt like Hyunjin wasn't really over the weird pizza girl from the start.

As Heejin shrieks while Hyunjin smears paint on her face, Hyejoo can't help but roll her eyes. Why is she so bitter?

Maybe it's because the highschoolers' best friends to apparent lovers story was one she wished she had for herself. That's probably it.

She sighs and continues to wait.

"Olivia!" a girl calls.

The raven-haired girl removes an airpod, narrowing her eyes at the unfamiliar voice. It's that girl Zoa, a seventh grader in student council, who dons a neon green vest on gate duty.

"Your ride is here!"

Hyejoo is confused.

First of all, Eunseo is horribly late.

Second, when she walks out of her alcove, she doesn't recognize any of the cars in the loading zone as hers.

Third, when Zoa points to the car here for Hyejoo, it's not Eunseo at all. The eighth grader doesn't recognize the older Asian couple behind the dashboard.

"They're here for you," Zoa says.

Hyejoo just stares at the seventh grader and the car, stupefied. She narrows her eyes in suspicion, tucking her messy hair behind her ear to make sure she's seeing this right.

Hesitantly, she walks up to the sedan's driver side window, nearing the elderly woman behind the wheel who is staring at the child in awe. She whispers something to the man next to her, still looking at Hyejoo.

"Hello?" Hyejoo taps on the window.

It lowers slowly, to clearly unveil the weathered face of an aged Korean woman.

"You look just like your mother," she breathes, with such raw amazement in her voice Hyejoo nearly shrinks into herself.

Hyejoo eyes the older man in the shotgun seat, presumably her husband.

He stares at Hyejoo eerily, not saying a word.

“I think you have the wrong kid,” Hyejoo says to the woman.

“Hyejoo,” the woman with a thick Korean accent. “We are your grandparents!” she says, like the fact is a final, epic crescendo of a lifelong reunion.

Hyejoo blinks, hard. “Grandparents?”

The eighth grader doesn’t believe it for a second.

“You don’t recognize us?” the woman says, sounding a bit betrayed.

“I haven’t met either of you in my entire life,” Hyejoo says carefully.

The woman reaches over the center console, picking up two Korean passports and placing them in Hyejoo’s hand. “Why don’t you see for yourself?”

Inside, both their photos stare at Hyejoo, adjacent to the surname Ha. Hyejoo looks up at them slowly, and begins to see the resemblance.

In front of her are the halves of Sooyoung Ha.

“We’ve been waiting to see you for so long,” the grandmother smiles happily. “Oh Hyejoo, we’re so happy to see you.”

Something still feels off.

“Oh, your mother asked us to pick you up today,” she coos.

By now, the parents behind them have become irritated. Hyejoo’s ride is holding up the line. Some honk loudly.

Hyejoo, stunned, looks to the only possible figure of supervision - Zoa. But the child wouldn’t know what to do; she’s even younger than Hyejoo. Yet there is not a single teacher nearby.

Hyejoo, feeling pressured as more cars honk behind them, stiffly climbs into the back seat.

Once the door closes, she instantly regrets it. The car smells nothing like the sweet musky scents of her mothers’ perfumes, or the ever-present new car smell of Eunseo’s town car. The sedan reeks of a cheap rental, like Hyejoo is stepping into someone else’s life - one that isn’t hers at all.

But her grandmother has already begun driving away, out of the St. Jihyo’s lots, down the steep hill.

“How come I’ve never met you before?” Hyejoo asks anxiously.

“We just got enough money to visit the states,” the grandmother smiles at her sweetly in the rear view mirror. “We’ve been saving up to come here for years.”

(With Sooyoung's money.)

Just as Hyunjin is about to get the upper hand, pinning her old flame to the ground once again, she sees her little friend Hyejoo outside the school gate speaking to someone in a car she had never seen before. It didn't look like their chauffeur's car, and it *definitely* wasn't Jiwoo's monster truck. The babysitter's flirty giggles fade as she watches the younger girl get into the car.

Something about the whole thing makes Hyunjin feel uneasy, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

Heejin sees the concern on her crush's face. "What's up?"

Hyunjin flops off of Heejin and watches as the car drives off, still concerned for the kid she has come to know. "My depressed adoptive child just got in an unfamiliar car... Maybe I'm overreacting but my Hyejoo safety senses are tingling."

"Your... what?"

"Hold on..." Hyunjin stands to take out her phone, looking for **Sooyoung Ha** in her contacts. *Better to be safe than sorry.*

Sooyoung picks up on the first ring. *"Hello."*

"Mrs. Ha- Um..." Hyunjin starts. "I-"

"Hyunjin, can this wait? I am on my way to pick up Hyejoo at her school and I'm late." Sooyoung had told Eunseo not to pick up Hyejoo today, for the first time in years. Tzuyu said at her therapy session earlier that no matter how hard it may be, Sooyoung should make more of an effort to spend time with Hyejoo. Sooyoung figured this would be the most convenient way for the both of them.

"Oh- That's actually what I'm calling about Mrs. Ha... Er- I think someone else just picked her up."

"...What?"

"Yes, I- I just saw them-"

"Jiwoo? Was it Jiwoo?"

"No, it was two older people Mrs. Ha, I've never seen them before or their car on the property," Hyunjin explains, while Heejin watches her worriedly.

"You watched my daughter get into a stranger's vehicle and didn't intervene?!" Sooyoung is absolutely furious. Not to mention, terrified.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Ha, I was far away and I didn't notice until she was already getting into the car-"

"How could you not have noticed Hyunjin? Aren't you an employee of that school?!"

Hyunjin, with paint all over her, guiltily looks at Heejin's concerned face and then straight to the ground. "Uh..."

"What kind of car was it," Sooyoung demands.

“I- I don’t know- I don’t remember Mrs. Ha, but I know Hyejoo got in the car willingly-”

Sooyoung hangs up on Hyunjin, immediately calling Hyejoo.

While the grandmother does all the talking with Hyejoo (which is not much, and all unsettlingly vague), her husband continues to watch her with a solemn, calculating gaze through the rear mirror. Hyejoo is so creeped out that she reaches for her phone to break their eye contact. Her phone was on Do Not Disturb this whole time to salvage her dying battery. Hyejoo is shaken to her core at the consequences.

9 MISSED CALLS - SOOYOUNG HA

Sooyoung Ha: Where are you??

Sooyoung Ha: Why are you not answering your phone

Sooyoung Ha: You need to go home now.

Sooyoung Ha: I am at your school right now to pick you up and I cannot find you. Tell me who you are with right now.

5 MISSED CALLS - SOOYOUNG HA

Sooyoung Ha: HYEJOO

Sooyoung Ha: WHERE ARE YOU

Hyejoo: im fine.

Sooyoung Ha: ????

Sooyoung Ha: Why aren’t you at the gate.

Sooyoung Ha: Why haven’t you been answering your phone

Hyejoo: im sorry i didn’t see

Sooyoung Ha: Your mother and I gave you a phone for a reason and this is how you use it?

Sooyoung Ha: And why would you ever get into a stranger’s car?!?!?!?!? Are you out of your mind?!?!?!?

Hyejoo: im sorry

Sooyoung Ha: Where are you and who are you with.

Hyejoo: theyre not strangers

Hyejoo: theyre your parents i guess

Sooyoung's eyes nearly fall out of her head.

That's impossible, she thinks, but-

Hyejoo: they showed me ID to prove it

Hyejoo: theyre your parents it's our family name

Sooyoung's blood runs cold.

The CEO screams at the top of her lungs, bashing her fists against the steering wheel making the car horn honk deafeningly.

Hyejoo's phone immediately begins to vibrate- her mother is calling.

"Hyejoo, you listen to me and you listen to me very carefully. You need to get out of that car."

"Why?"

"Why?! You have the audacity to ask me why? Tell me where you are right now!"

"Why," Hyejoo asks again, defiant just for the hell of it. What's the worst that could happen, anyway? Sure, the situation was undoubtedly unusual. But I mean, they were clearly her grandparents, so-

"HYEJOO!" Sooyoung growls into the phone. *"LISTEN TO ME!"*

Hyejoo looks up at the elderly couple, docile enough, not believing anything Sooyoung is saying at all.

"Hyejoo," Sooyoung now sounds genuinely afraid, more afraid than Hyejoo's ever heard her. *"Listen to me now. You have to get away from th-*

The call cuts abruptly, the screen turning black. Hyejoo's phone is dead.

Hyejoo sits nervously at the table of the Korean restaurant downtown, facing the couple. "When will I go home?"

"In a hurry to leave so soon?" the grandmother smiles calmly.

"No," Hyejoo lies nervously. "I just have a lot of homework."

"You have your backpack don't you?" she asserts, while carefully gathering some banchan onto her plate. Hyejoo pales. Her backpack is indeed at her feet.

The restaurant is small, and it's not one that Hyejoo has ever been to before. They had driven somewhere downtown, but made so many twists and turns through the maze of Los Angeles that Hyejoo had lost track of the path they went down. She does not know where she is, and she does not know which way is home.

She eyes the room for any sort of iPhone charger to contact Sooyoung, but none are in sight.

"We came all the way from South Korea, Hyejoo," the grandmother states with a smile. "You can stay with us for a little longer."

Hyejoo says nothing. The energy her grandmother emits is nothing like Sooyoung's. It's wiser, and much more sinister.

"Have you ever flown out of the country, dear?"

Quietly, Hyejoo shakes her head.

"You will love it in Korea."

Hyejoo is bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

The grandmother hums quietly, not saying anything for a few moments as she stirs her tea.

"You seem very unhappy with your life, Hyejoo."

Hyejoo adjusts her posture self-consciously, as if the entire restaurant were staring her down.

"What makes you say that?"

"You have dark circles under your eyes," she notes, not even needing to take another look at Hyejoo. "I've seen you in pictures with Sooyoung before, but it's even worse in person... You have so many years ahead of you, but you just look so tired..." she looks at Hyejoo pitifully. Her husband remains quiet. "...You're not happy at home?"

"I'm... My... My m-," Hyejoo answers, picking at the skin of her fingers anxiously under the table. The atmosphere is starting to feel dangerously poisonous. "I'm--"

"Sooyoung?" The grandmother corrects.

"My other mom lives with us too," Hyejoo says. *At least, she used to.*

The grandmother hums quietly, stirring her tea. It's hard to coax herself into staying quiet amongst her disgust.

"Your mother is now seeing a therapist, isn't that right?"

Hyejoo blinks. "How do you know that?" her voice comes out hoarse. "She told you?"

"She doesn't have to, we'll always know about her," she responds, taking another slow bite of her food. "A mother should always know what her daughter is up to."

Neither of them explain themselves further.

Hyejoo's eyes dart toward her grandfather, who is still yet to say another word. She begins to suspect he is mute, until he mutters something under his breath.

Shame.

"I'm happy at home," Hyejoo defends, no matter how false the claim may be. "I love my moms."

"Moms?"

"Yes. Sooyoung *and* Jiwoo."

Her grandmother hums into her teacup once more. "I believe you think Jiwoo is your mother, and I think that's wonderful."

Hyejoo digs her nails into her skin so hard that it stings. She knows that was far too out of line. The child wants so badly to defend Jiwoo. But the way the older woman is looking Hyejoo dead in the eyes makes her too paralyzed to croak out a single word.

The eighth grader breaks eye contact, reaches for her glass of water. The grandmother gasps hard.

"You're bleeding!" she exclaims.

Hyejoo's eyes widen at the blood on her hand smearing onto the clear glass. Her skin is bleeding in multiple places from how anxiously she's picked her skin. "Oh- I-" she clutches a napkin to it. "Sorry- I-" Hyejoo, frazzled, realizes it's from her own hand. "I- I need to go to the bathroom-"

Before the grandparents can object, Hyejoo shoots up from her chair loudly and runs to the small restroom in the back of the restaurant.

Locking herself behind the flimsy door, she repeatedly tries to revive her iPhone, but to no avail. Blood starts to leak onto the black glass.

Please, please please, she sweats, her gut twisting.

Hyejoo taps the screen harder and harder. She curses quietly, and starts to notice her breaths are becoming shorter.

She looks at herself in the mirror panickedly.

The eighth grader bolts straight out of the bathroom, through the kitchen, towards the back door.

Hyejoo runs deep into the city, leaving her backpack and grandparents behind.

Hyejoo sprints as fast as she can through the city, making as many twists and turns as possible. She recognizes none of the streets.

The eighth grader is lucky that the sun is still shining. She is toeing the line of a shadier part of town.

Choking on her breaths, Hyejoo's lungs burn - yet there is no way in hell she will let herself slow

down.

She struggles and turns another corner, and-

BAM!

Hyejoo has run straight into some passerby's chest, nearly knocking the woman over and causing her to drop some of her groceries.

"Oh, I'm so sorry honey!" A familiar voice cries, while Hyejoo apologizes profusely at the same time. "I wasn't watching where I was- Hyejoo?"

When Hyejoo looks up, she recognizes the woman to be Sana, one of Chaeyoung's mothers and the co-owner of Heart Shakers Pizza Parlor.

"I-"

"Hyejoo- Oh sweetie you're bleeding!" Sana says, noticing the deep red crescents on Hyejoo's hand from her nails, the blood coming from her hangnails. She gently takes the child's hand into her own. "What are you doing out here in the street? Are you all by yourself?"

"I-I," the little eighth grader stammers, having to bite her lip to stop herself from tearing up. "I don't- I don't know and my phone died and-"

"Did you get lost?"

Hyejoo shakes her head stiffly.

"Are you running from someone? Is... Is someone trying to come after you?"

Hyejoo doesn't even know how to answer, and instead can only stifle a sob.

Sana takes the child into her warm arms. Hyejoo's heartbeat slows; the moment reminds her of Jiwoo.

Then the child really starts to cry, realizing that all she wants is her mother.

"Let's get you somewhere safe now okay sweetie?" Sana offers warmly. "How about you come with me to the pizza parlor? Where we had trivia night? We'll go ahead and call your mom okay?"

Sana takes Hyejoo's hand, and turns to walk them both to her parked car.

When the sun has set, the pizza parlor's lobby is empty save for Momo, Sana, Chaeyoung, and Hyejoo.

The mother dials up Sooyoung Ha in the back from the landline. Momo had temporarily closed down the store, shutting the blinds when her wife and the young girl had arrived. Sana had said she didn't know if Hyejoo was running from someone unsafe, but made it known to the pizza chef that she wanted to make sure they didn't find her.

Chaeyoung and Hyejoo sit at a table. When Hyejoo's tears were dried, and her hand was all bandaged, Chaeyoung amiably offered to share her Nintendo Switch, Momo attempting to play with them as well. As the three of them stare at the bright console screen, Hyejoo tries her best to focus on the flashing lights instead of the tears welling back up in her eyes.

When Sooyoung finally makes it to the restaurant, instinctively, Hyejoo leaps out of her seat.

“Oh my God,” Sooyoung overwhelms her daughter with the force of her tightest embrace yet. Terrified, Sooyoung makes sure her child is safe and in one piece.

Hyejoo trembles like a leaf in her arms, shutting her eyes tightly.

“What the hell happened?” Sooyoung whispers softly, never having been so frantic in her entire lifetime. “I almost called the police, I-” Hyejoo doesn’t respond, and instead sobs into the CEO’s shoulder. “Okay, it’s okay,” Sooyoung says instead. “It’s okay now, I’m here,” she assures, holding her only child even tighter.

As they bury into each other under the low yellow light of the familiar pizza parlor, the mother and daughter look afraid to let go.

“Thank you,” Sooyoung says sincerely to Sana, who watches the two in endearment, so happy her daughter’s classmate is now safe and sound.

(It’s quite a shift from when Sana last saw Sooyoung and Hyejoo, on Trivia Night.)

When Hyejoo starts to calm down, Sooyoung holds her tight and tells Sana she cannot thank her enough. She even offers any amount of financial compensation, to which Sana declines warmly. Still, Sooyoung purchases 5 whole pepperoni pizzas, all while Hyejoo stays glued to Sooyoung.

(It’s not 20 minutes long, but it’s a start.)

“I GOT THE GOODS!”

Yejin jumps at her mother’s demonic sounding shriek, then sends daggers at the woman standing in her doorway.

“Why the FUCK are you talking like that Mom!?”

“Language! But sorry Yeo-Yeo did I scare you?” Haseul says in a much sweeter tone.

Yejin just stares back blankly.

“You’re right, I thought I’d try that nickname out but it didn’t flow right.” Haseul says smiling as she holds up the collection of random items being held in her arms. “But I did get the things you asked me to get. I don’t know what ‘smart looking S-H-I-T’ means exactly, but I hope this will do. I found an old Physics textbook and one of those ball things that goes click-clack.” Haseul says, holding up a book and a Newton’s Cradle. “I don’t think I’m supposed to have this textbook though. I feel like I need to call my high school so I can return it.”

“I guess that’s good enough, just set it on my bed please.” Yejin says, running over to one of her walls to rip off a poster displaying a cute cartoon version of a cannabis leaf saying **PUFF PUFF**.

“NOT OL’ FAITHFUL!” Haseul gasps as she watches Yejin replace the poster with one of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In fact, now that Haseul looks around, there seems to have been a lot of decor changes in her daughter’s room. It also looked like she had just cleaned it. Both of these behaviors

are rather alarming coming from Yeojin.

“What are you doing to your room?”

Her daughter suddenly stiffens, a redness growing in her cheeks.

“I’m not- I just like knew... I’ll tell you that... GOD WHAT IS THIS, 20 QUESTIONS?” Yeojin stutters out, clearly flustered and not willing to give her mother any explanation.

“Ok sheesh! I was just wondering because you’re Megan Fox poster isn’t on your wall anymore and I thought maybe she died or something.” Haseul says.

“MEGAN FOX WILL *NEVER* DIE.” Yeojin shrieks before taking a deep breath. She closes her eyes and rubs her temples in an attempt to calm down. “I’m *just*. Trying something new.”

“Okie dokie!” Haseul smiles, setting the objects down on her kid’s bed.

Suddenly the doorbell rings.

“That must be Choerry-” Haseul can’t finish her sentence because Yeojin is shoving her out of the room.

“YEAH, I KNOW, CAN YOU GO ANSWER IT PLEASE! But like take your time okay thanks love you Mom BYE.” Yeojin slams the door shut leaving Haseul in the hallway.

A few moments later, a knock comes to Yeojin’s bedroom door and the Soundcloud rapper’s stomach drops out of her body. She adjusts the physics textbook that is now on her desk and moves to start Newton’s cradle, forcing herself into a ‘nonchalant’ pose. She looks like a newly placed Old Navy mannequin for a back to school sale.

“Come in!” Yeojin squeaks.

The student body president’s head pops into the room, a bright smile on her face as always. Yeojin can already feel her cheeks getting red. The girl comes into the room fully, purple backpack straps being securely held in place.

“What are you doing?” Choerry giggles at Yeojin’s clearly uncomfortable stature.

“Um..” Yeojin grabs the text book now and flips through it. “Studying...”

Choerry’s face turns to worry. “We have a test?!? Oh no, I must’ve been too focused on my birthday. Oh God, I swear I wrote everything down in my-”

“NO! No, Choerry!” Yeojin wants to facepalm herself for scaring the other girl. “This isn’t for school, this is for... my special... class...”

“Huh?”

“I take a special class for... college. Yeah, I’m taking a *college* course.” Yeojin says, brushing off her shoulder.

“Really? Wow, how did you even do that?” Choerry asks, genuinely curious and focused on her best friend.

However, the attention is beginning to *seriously* fluster Yeojin. *Choerry is so pretty...*

“SO THE QUINCEANERA!” Yeojin barks, slamming the book shut making Choerry jump a little, but the class president quickly regains her composure.

“Yes! We have a lot to plan!” Choerry sits down on the floor next to Yeojin’s bed and pats the floor next to her.

Yeojin gulps, putting the textbook back on her desk and moving to sit next to her new crush.

“By the way, what happened to Megan Fox?”

As time passes, the girls plan a variety of different party events together. Yeojin had been asked to be the birthday girl’s quince manager and she was taking her job very seriously. She had even made the invites for free, no mixtape promo requested, and invited every Facebook account she could find (it took 6 hours before she passed out) via a Facebook group called **CHOERRY’S BIRTHDAY BASH Brought to you by LilPeni\$**.

Haseul had just finished interrupting them to ask if they had wanted some of her famous Totino’s (to which the middle schoolers abruptly declined. They never know if she means the pizza rolls or the neighbor’s runny lasagna anymore.) and were building their dream setlist for Taylor Swift’s performance at the quince.

(Yes, Jinsol had indeed booked Choerry’s favorite artist, Taylor Swift, for a live concert on their private beach. She also booked a few other pop stars per Choerry’s request.

She wanted to spoil her daughter after not being there enough for years. But Jungeun still sighed and mumbled something about how their daughter is too spoiled.)

Choerry takes a huge sigh. The song “Lover” only brings terrible memories for her now.

“What’s wrong?” Yeojin asks, seeing the girl’s current expression. Choerry looks just like she did when she accidentally stepped on a ladybug at school. Minus the waterworks.

“Nothing just... Do you think Hyejoo and Chaewon will come?” Choerry asks, beginning to play with her hands nervously.

“Oh... I mean maybe. If Chaewon goes... I don’t know.” Yeojin says truthfully. She didn’t feel that lying to Choerry in this moment would help anybody. Hyejoo hadn’t even talked to them now that they were back at school.

Choerry suddenly flops over on her side like a fish. “I’m so sad.”

Yeojin puts her pencil down and moves the setlist aside, lying down next to the girl herself. “Hey, it’s not your fault they aren’t on good terms.”

Choerry raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, well. Maybe a little.” Yeojin says, looking up at the ceiling. “But don’t be so mean to yourself. You’re trying everything you can to make up for it.”

“I just wish I could do something that actually fixes things.” Choerry pouts. “I feel awful.”

“Choerry, you made a mistake, you’re not a bad person for that. Everyone fucks up sometimes. My mom fucks up 24/7 and she’s a grown adult. She fell down the stairs this morning, then said she threw a table down the stairs when I asked her what the noise was. I don’t know why she actually needed to break our table and put it at the bottom of the stairs to prove it when I wasn’t going to believe her anyway but.” Yeojin says, smiling at the thought of her mother tumbling down to the floor.

Choerry sits up giggling, now able to look down at her best friend. “Thanks Yeojin. You always know how to make me feel better.”

Yeojin sends a smile back to her until Choerry decides to fix the shorter girl’s hair. The girl suddenly shoots up, smacking her head into the other girl’s.

“OW.” They both say, and then they both start bursting out laughing.

“Let’s get back to work.” Yeojin says, face beet red with embarrassment.

A few hours later, Haseul could hear the children in her house coming down the stairs. She pauses her current viewing of the World’s Bass Fishing Competition to say goodbye to her daughter’s guest.

“Choerry are you on your way out?” Haseul asks, comfortable standing in her reindeer slippers. (She and Yeojin had gotten matching ones for Christmas.)

“Yeah! My mom’s outside already.” Choerry smiles.

As they approach the front door, Yeojin moves quickly in order to open it chivalrously for the other girl, Jinsoul inside her car parked out front now becoming visible to all of them. Haseul immediately becomes suspicious.

“Why don’t you open the door for me?” Haseul asks, and Yeojin grits her teeth.

“What do you mean? I do this for you all the time.” Yeojin says, hoping her mother would get the hint to play along.

(She doesn’t.)

“What? No you’ve never done that for-”

“HAHA YOU’RE SO FUNNY MOM.” Yeojin blurts.

“You guys are great!” Choerry says, thinking nothing of this interaction and walks out the door calmly. She halts in her tracks. “OH WAIT!”

Choerry takes her backpack off and digs around the front pocket. She pulls out a purple glitter ridden piece of paper. “This is for you.”

Yeojin takes the card, reading over what’s written neatly in Choerry’s handwriting.

SPECIAL VIP INVITE

For my one and only bestest friend <3

I hope you can make it!

RSVP by telling me right now :)

“I know you made the invites for everyone but I realized you didn’t make one for yourself!” Choerry says, “So I made this special for you.”

She begins to sway back and forth, suddenly a little nervous but unsure why. Haseul looks between the two, gears beginning to turn in her head.

Jinsol, waiting outside, seems to also have gears turning, but in a more concerned manner. She basically has her face squished against the car window, squinting to try and see what her daughter could possibly be doing with this delinquent.

Yejin is the reddest she has been all night, clearly blushing at the fact that Choerry did this just for her.

“Um yeah obviously.” Yeojin says, trying her best not to freak out. “This is way nicer than any of the invites I made. I love it!”

Haseul looks over at the invite that looks like it was made by a 3 year-old and immediately knows Yeojin is lying.

Haseul’s eyes widen as she realizes what’s going on inside her daughter’s brain. The door, the room changes, the nervousness before Choerry’s arrival and now this blatant lie to flatter her friend.

Her daughter 100 percent has a crush! On Haseul’s *favorite* student no less!

“YAY! I’ll see you there then!” Choerry gives Yeojin a big hug but it quickly ends because Jinsol has decided to take advantage of her very loud car horn.

Choerry turns to her mother with exasperation and then back to the Jo’s. “Sorry, my mom must want to go home. I’ll text you Yeojin! Bye Principal Haseul!”

“Byeeee!” Haseul says, waving like a maniac as the girl gets into her car. Yeojin closes the door only to see Haseul looking at her like a mad woman.

“What.” Yeojin asks.

“YOU HAVE A CRUSH ON CHOERRY.” Haseul says, smile stretching from ear to ear. “OH THIS IS JUST WONDERFUL!!!”

“Stop. No.” Yeojin says, trying to walk away from her mother and towards the kitchen, but the older woman just follows.

“YEOJIN AND CHOERRY SITTING IN A TREE. K-I-S-S-SOMETHING ABOUT A G.”

“You are a teacher.” Yeojin says, trying to change the subject but also actually concerned that her mother doesn’t know how to spell that word.

“AWWWWWWWW! ARE YOU GUYS GOING TO DATE?” Haseul asks, knowing she’s being slightly obnoxious.

“I DON’T KNOW. ARE YOU AND MS. WONG GOING TO DATE?” Yeojin snaps back, but Haseul doesn’t let it phase her. She finally has something to get back at her daughter for making fun of her all these years.

“THAT IS SO CUTEETEEE. Do you want to hold her haaaaand.” Haseul says in a teasing manner.

“THAT’S IT.” Yeojin says, making a grab for something in the kitchen drawer only to pull out a spoon. “I’M GONNA... I’M GONNA STAB YOU!”

“What are you gonna do with- AH!” Haseul says, as Yeojin begins to chase her around.

Both family members are laughing as they continue to run around their own house, Yeojin holding a spoon up in the air, and Haseul running for dear life.

Just another normal night for them.

On the lookout beside the Ha apple orchard, Hyejoo sits alone to watch the skyline.

The thirteen year-old had many quiet places throughout the desolate mansion, even when she was a child. But this one, at night, had proven to be her favorite. She relishes in the sounds of crickets, while Dog barks at something (another lingering deer, probably), at the other end of the estate.

Sooyoung had noticed her daughter while changing into her sleeping clothes. Through the glass walls of her massive walk-in closet, she spotted Hyejoo in the grass with her knees pulled to her chest.

“Are you alright?” Sooyoung asks. A loaded question, really; Hyejoo was rarely ever alright. Fallen leaves crunch at her feet as she approaches her.

Hyejoo nods quietly.

Sooyoung, unsure of what to do next, stands awkwardly behind Hyejoo in silence. The girl continues to stare at the skyscrapers of Los Angeles.

Sooyoung takes a seat a safe distance away from her, and Hyejoo notices that her mother is wearing old sweatpants and a large grey T-shirt. Ever since Jiwoo had left, Sooyoung had seemed to be taking a break from the ornate silk pajamas and luxurious foreign robes.

Sooyoung pulls a package from behind her, and sets it in between them. Hyejoo eyes it. It’s addressed to her, from months ago.

Sooyoung says nothing; somehow Hyejoo already knows.

“Who are they,” the child whispers in the darkness. “I thought they were your parents.”

“They are my parents,” Sooyoung affirms lowly. “...Parents aren’t always good people,” she adds softly. Despite every category of her parents’ abuse, in front of Hyejoo, Sooyoung feels she’s not one that should be critiquing.

Maybe she’s just exaggerating. Maybe Jiwoo, and Tzuyu are both exaggerating. Maybe she just wasn’t strong enough, just like she’s always been told.

Sooyoung shakes her head to take herself out of her worst thoughts. She focuses her attention to her daughter, who rests her chin between her knees.

“I called the police.” Sooyoung says seriously. “While you were freshening up. They will look into

the situation.”

Hyejoo hugs herself tighter.

“I’m very sorry Hyejoo.” Sooyoung looks at her daughter.

“It’s not your fault,” the eighth grader murmurs. Crickets chirp loudly around them. “What were they going to do with me?”

Silence overtakes them again.

“Were they going to take me?” Hyejoo asks.

Sooyoung sucks in her lips carefully and takes a deep, deep breath. “No one is going to take you.”

Hyejoo nods quietly in response. “Why haven’t you talked about them before?”

Sooyoung just stares out into the sea of lights before them. Hyejoo sees no signs of life in her mother’s black eyes.

“...What did they do to you?”

“...Maybe we can talk about it when you get older.” Sooyoung says, looking down at her feet.

Hyejoo nods at the alarming response, her heart becoming sore for the woman who has given her the material world as they know it. But again, these two don’t really know how to communicate.

“You don’t have to forgive me Hyejoo, but I’m sorry for being so cruel to you.”

Her daughter freezes, then rips at the dewy grass nervously.

“I’m sorry for Trivia Night, and I’m sorry for every other time.” Sooyoung says. “But most of all, I’m sorry for getting upset at you for reading your poem. You were just sharing your feelings. I should have never gotten upset at you for that.”

Hyejoo feels the lump in her throat only get bigger.

“Let me rephrase that, actually,” Sooyoung sighs. “What I’m truly sorry for the most is everything I did to lead up to that,” she puts her chin on her knees. “I’m- I’m not very good at- No, it doesn’t matter.”

Hyejoo is shaking hard, but hides it behind the front of a chilly night.

“My mother said things to me that I thought were okay to say.” Sooyoung looks down in pain. “And I thought it was normal. I know now that none of it was. ...But that’s no excuse, okay?” she says, turning to face her daughter.

Hyejoo looks ambivalent, refusing to look back at Sooyoung.

“I just wanted you to know, Hyejoo.” Sooyoung pulls at her body. “I’m sorting my shit out. And I will probably be in therapy for the rest of my life,” she huffs. “But... I should have gone sooner.”

Hyejoo does nothing for what feels like hours.

Then, the child nods. “Okay.”

Sooyoung nods back, not knowing what else to do.

“Thanks,” says Hyejoo.

“...I feel like maybe we should hug or something.” Hyejoo says flatly.

“Yes, that would be the standard practice.”

Sooyoung scooches over to her daughter in the grass, and envelops her in a tight hug that they will both remember for the rest of their lives.

Before either of them can cry-

“Ew,” Hyejoo says in a panic, then pulls away.

“Gross.” Sooyoung nods.

Then, they’re back to silence.

“Don’t you wanna open it?” Sooyoung whispers, gesturing to the gift for Hyejoo.

Hyejoo stands up instead. Then, she picks up the package, throws it in the air, and punts it over the lookout impulsively.

“Fuck your mom,” the child grumbles.

Sooyoung, in disbelief, looks at Hyejoo with eyes nearly bulging out of her head.

The daughter sits back down with a little smile of solidarity.

For just a second, they are smiling together.

Then, Hyejoo’s phone begins to ring in her lap. (She’s never putting it on Do Not Disturb mode again.)

INCOMING CALL:

Choerry Kim

Hyejoo immediately declines, then shoves the phone down her lap.

“Why didn’t you answer?” her mother asks.

“I don’t wanna go to her stupid quince. I don’t care if Chaewon is going, or Dua Lipa, or Jesus or St. Jihyo. I don’t care.” Hyejoo says bitterly.

Sooyoung sighs, tilting her head in allowance.

“Do you love her?”

Hyejoo looks angry. “Ew, CHOERRY?”

“No. God. Chaewon.” Sooyoung says. “I liked her you know. When we carpooled. I think one day that ruthless little girl will have a powerful success story.”

Hyejoo snorts, then turns very red.

“She reminds me of one of those small dogs in third world countries. They’re a little rabid but they know how to fight,” Sooyoung nods in approval. “...So do you?”

Her eighth grader shrugs halfheartedly.

“What is that-” Sooyoung mocks her mannerism exaggeratedly.

“Yes I love her.” Hyejoo says quickly and quietly.

Sooyoung stares up at the faint traces of stars in the smoggy sky. “If you have a second chance, you shouldn’t let her get away. Even as a friend.”

Hyejoo looks away.

“...I don’t know.”

“Life is short,” Sooyoung tells her, staring blankly into the distance. “I don’t want you to have regrets in the future.”

Do you? Hyejoo wonders.

Sooyoung looks back at her daughter. Too many of them come to mind at once.

She hopes Hyejoo never turns out like her.

Vivi opens her front door, letting in the midnight air. “Haseul?”

Haseul, indeed, is standing right there on her porch. “I have to tell you something,”

“Haseul what are you doing here? It’s so late-” (And it is. Yeojin, Chaewon, the entire neighborhood is asleep.)

“I know, and I-I’m sorry to wake you up, but there is something that you need to know that I can’t hold in anymore.”

Vivi’s heart thumps loudly in her chest as they stare at each other.

Is she finally going to tell me how she feels?

Deep down, Vivi knows that these two aren’t co-workers anymore, friends, or best friends at that.

What this is is something novel, that will haunt Vivi for the rest of her life if she ever loses it.

“Haseul, I-”

“Chaewon was bullied,” Haseul says, as empathetic as she can be.

The art teacher’s heart drops. “I- What? Haseul are you joking with me right now?”

“There was an organized bullying incident late last year, and Chaewon kept it a secret,” Haseul

breathes. “In the gym.”

It clicks together in Vivi’s brain.

“Hyejoo? Hyejoo *hit* her?”

“No, Hyejoo defended her, then took the fall because Chaewon didn’t want you to know,” Haseul says seriously. “I’m sorry, and I’m sorry I couldn’t wait until we were at work, but I just found out and it has been eating me alive and I can’t *keep* it from you any longer. These kids are- these kids are like my children too and- and I wouldn’t be doing my job.”

“Why- Why wouldn’t she tell me-” Vivi puts her face into her hands. “Oh my God,” “Why didn’t I notice- oh my God, this is *all* my fault-”

“No, no no no, hey-” Haseul tenderly takes Vivi’s hands away from her face, looking into her eyes. All boundaries of their working relationship have officially been broken. She looks into her eyes deeply. “It’s not your fault at all, okay?” Haseul says, cupping her cheeks.

Tears begin to well up in Vivi’s eyes, so Haseul takes the teacher into her arms.

Hyunjin cannot believe she is at a child’s birthday party.

The event was taking place below the Kim’s villa on their private beach. Tables were spread out around the sand as kids of St. Jiho’s were running around chaotically, some playing games, some swimming in the sea, and some jumping inside a huge bouncy house with a banner across it reading **FELIZ CUMPLEAÑOS CHOERRY**. A good amount of parents hang around too, knowing full well that this is the most extravagant birthday party they’ve ever been to. A gigantic concert stage was placed at the center of the beach, and Big Time Rush was currently warming up the crowd by singing their smash hit “Boyfriend.”

Hyunjin dressed quite nicely for the event. Knowing the type of school these wealthy kids went to, she didn’t want to stand out too much in casual clothes. The high schooler had on a chic black jumpsuit that fit her perfectly while still executing the perfect amount of formality and fashion.

She kinda wishes Heejin could see her in it...

Or Lia. Hyunjin shakes herself out of it, guilty. This is not what tonight was about.

“THIS IS A KID’S BIRTHDAY PARTY?” Yunho says bopping his head to the booming music. The baseball player was sporting a button up shirt and silk jacket that matched his hair perfectly, black jeans and shoes to complete the look. He holds up a pamphlet that has tonight’s incredible lineup. “Did you know Big Time Rush was gonna perform? I love this song!”

Hyunjin looks at him in confusion. Who even was this boy? “You like Big Time Rush?”

“You don’t?” He asks with clear concern on his face. “I might need to rethink this friendship thing.”

Hyunjin cracks a smile. Yunho had offered to pick her up in his own car (He didn’t really trust her driving.) and when the shiny blue Jeep showed up in front of her house he was waving frantically, like a kindergartener to his parents after dropping him off on the first day. The guy had gotten the gift for the kids that he had promised, and even let Hyunjin use his aux cord.

On top of that, he knew almost every word to every song the girl played and basically begged her to send him the playlist. Hyunjin couldn't tell if he was a cool guy or just obnoxious. She decided to give him until the end of the night before she called it.

Suddenly, a woman who seems to be trying to act more composed than she actually was approaches both of them.

"Hello! Welcome to our daughter's... quince." She cringes at the last word. "I'm one of Choerry's mothers, Jungeun, and I'm glad you could make it uh..."

Jungeun looks at both high schoolers with an absolute blank face. "I'm sorry I'm not familiar..."

"Yunho!" The tall high school boy says, as if that will jog something in the woman's memory. "And this is Hyunjin!"

Something clicks in Jungeun's brain as she remembers Jiwoo telling her about the babysitter from New Years Eve. "Oh right, the kidnapper." Jungeun says, repeating Sooyoung's words and not her own.

"YOU KIDNAPPED CHOERRY?" Yunho shouts, a little too loud making Hyunjin grab his arm and push him away from the conversation.

"Does he know Choerry?" Jungeun asks Hyunjin, now a little worried as to who this kid is.

"No, I'm sorry I'll take care of him, thanks for welcoming us Mrs. Kim!" The soccer player says, quickly leaving the conversation.

"What is the matter with you?" Hyunjin asks, and Yunho looks down at her with his arms crossed.

"Well she said you were a KIDNAPPER, I don't want to be around a criminal!" He exclaims, and Hyunjin can't even tell if he's joking or not.

"I'm going to become a criminal in the next five seconds if you shout like that again."

"OOOOO WAIT. A SNACK TABLE. You want something? Don't answer actually I'll guess." The boy says, and without another word he vanishes in the crowd of people.

Hyunjin just sighs as Big Time Rush continues to sing in the background.

A few moments later, Choerry Kim herself, surrounded by her usual crowd of friends (minus Hyunjin's favorite middle schooler Hyejoo) approach the girl almost expectantly. They all have on cute party attire except for the shortest one who looks like a secret service agent. Suddenly she holds her hand to her ear. "NO THE PIÑATA IS SUPPOSED TO BE PLACED ON THE WEST SIDE OF THE BEACH, SOMI! HOW HARD IS IT TO FIGURE THAT OUT."

"Hi Hyunjin! So glad you could make it!" Choerry says, ignoring her bestfriend's shouting. The girl is trying to look at the high schooler directly, but she is clearly looking behind Hyunjin's shoulder to see if someone else was with her.

"Hey furry, did you bring some pizza with you... Maybe a specific delivery girl?" Yeojin asks, trying to be subtle.

"WHERE'S LIA." Yeri screams outright, and Chaewon elbows her in the stomach.

"What Yeri means to say is... I wrote on your invite that you could bring a date so we just thought

you would bring somebody!”

“So you really didn’t bring a date?” Chaewon asks, a little disappointed.

“Did someone say date?” Yunho reappears on cue, handing a croissant over to Hyunjin as he chomps on some puppy chow out of a cup. “You seem like a bagel type of person but this was the closest they had.”

“A MAN?” Yeojin and Chaewon both shriek in terror. Yeri is about to turn to violence but Choerry stops her before she can.

“Aww.” Yunho says, looking at the girls in front of him. “You guys are so adorable!”

“HYUNJIN HOW COULD YOU BRING A MAN HERE AS A DATE? TO THIS SACRED PLACE?” Yeojin asks as if Yunho isn’t right in front of her.

“I’m gonna be sick.” Yeri says, beginning to gag.

“Stop it.” Hyunjin says rubbing her temples. “He’s not even my date. He just came with me because I’m just...”

“I brought gifts!” Yunho says, seeing that Hyunjin was clearly struggling with trying to explain her current drama to a bunch of middle schoolers. He pulls out the Sky Zone gift card and hands it over to the birthday girl.

“Thank you so much!” Choerry says, and the girls crowd around to see the giftcard that reads **UNLIMITED JUMPS**. They look back up at him.

“Are you rich or something?” Chaewon asks.

“Um no, but I work there every other week day so if you come in I’ll just let you in for free.” Yunho says brightly, still chewing on his snack.

“Well played...” Yeojin says, taking a sigh. “Well I guess he can stay Hyunjin... but I was hoping for TEA.”

“And I was hoping for Lia. Tell her to text me.” Yeri says before flipping her hair and walking away.

“Enjoy the party!! There’s a special guest performer so don’t leave it’s so worth it I promise!!” Choerry says sweetly before moving on to another arriving guest, her friends following behind her.

“Well I think they like me!” Yunho says smiling. “Did I guess ok? Or do you want me to get you something different.”

Hyunjin looks down at her chocolate croissant. It was a scarily accurate guess... she *was* a bagel person. “No, this is fine.”

Yunho is very proud of himself and it shows on his face until he realizes that Hyunjin is just picking at the bread. “Are you okay?”

Hyunjin bites the inside of her cheek as she thinks. Was she really about to tell this guy about her problems?

“Is this about your two not girlfriends?” He asks.

Well, he asked first.

The girl sighs. “I guess. But it’s a long story.”

“I like stories.” Yunho plops down on the sand and pats the ground next to him. Hyunjin hesitantly sits next to him.

After a while, Hyunjin finishes explaining everything to the boy next to her, who holds absolutely no face of judgement.

“So you don’t want to lose either of them..?” Yunho says, half question, half statement.

“Yeah.” Hyunjin breathes out.

“That’s tough. But... can I say something?” Yunho asks and Hyunjin nods. “You need to give yourself a break. Even if it’s for one day. You think too much.”

Hyunjin sits there staring back at the boy. “How am I not supposed to think about this? I could end up hurting someone and I feel like I’m leading someone on even though I’m technically not really leading anyone on and-”

“WE’RE AT THE COOLEST PARTY I’VE EVER BEEN TO.” Yunho interrupts. “Ariana Grande is literally over there!”

It was true, Big Time Rush had finished their set and now Ariana Grande was performing one of her hit songs right at this very moment. Yeri was on stage as well, performing some sort of duet. It wouldn’t be the first time for Yeri though, as Ariana and her were already fairly well-acquainted.

“Look, I’m not saying not to care. Because obviously leading people on is mean. I’ll be honest, this situation sucks.”

“Gee, *you think?*” Hyunjin snaps back.

“But!” Yunho says quickly. “You should still give yourself a little bit of a break. I feel like you only care about their feelings, but you’re not even considering your own.”

Hyunjin sits stunned. *He’s kind of... right.*

“I just mean, you spend all day and all night worrying about if you’re hurting them when in reality, they both know where you are emotionally. I mean you said you made that clear right?”

“Right... well to Lia at least.” Hyunjin says.

“And Heejin isn’t any better than you if she hasn’t told you how she’s feeling. Especially after last time!”

Yunho smiles and Hyunjin feels somewhat comforted. *Gross.*

“Look I’m just saying, take things day by day. You don’t have to rush anything and most importantly you need to think about what you want because that’s how you’re going to figure this whole thing out. It’s not going to happen if you keep trying to make both of them happy.”

Hyunjin doesn't say anything, but Yunho stands up, motioning for the girl to stand up too. She does.

"Now as for me, I think we should go watch the crazy kid break dance with Ariana Grande from the front row. What about you?"

They both turn towards the stage and sure enough, Yeri is now spinning on her head as Ariana and her backup dancers hype her up.

Hyunjin surprisingly feels much lighter than she had felt in weeks. It was like finally being able to explain her situation instead of bottling it in was all she needed to not feel like a complete idiot. Sure she still felt bad, but at least she had someone to talk to about it.

"I think... I also want to see that from the front row." Hyunjin responds, and Yunho fist pumps into the air.

"COOL, Okay so just grab my shoulder and we can get there. I'm pretty good at crowd snaking." Yunho says, beginning to walk towards the audience.

Hyunjin laughs, picking up the pace to keep up with him.

She decides he's not so obnoxious after all.

Irene's eye twitches when she sees her sister, Joy, enter the Kim's residence walking towards her, Seulgi, and Yeri.

Joy Park and her wife Wendy have shown up, rolling in a huge cake. Well Wendy is rolling in the cake, Joy is just walking next to her looking as fabulous as ever.

"Auntie Wendy!" Yeri sings, running up to her. "Hi woman who I wish was my mother," she whispers, looking at Joy who winks back at her. Joy is Yeri's absolute favorite aunt, mainly because she spoils her rotten just to piss Irene off.

"Hi Irene!" Wendy says once she arrives at the table the Kang's are currently sitting at. "How have you guys been?"

"Great." Irene says, trying her best to be kind to her sister's wife. It's not like it was her fault that Wendy had married a demon.

(For context: ...Nevermind. It would be *way* too much to explain.)

"Hey sis!" Joy says, hugging Irene who does not return it at all. Joy boops Irene's nose as if the older sister didn't already want to push her off a cliff.

"And hi Seulgi! Oh my god it's been so long!" She hugs Seulgi as well, and Seulgi complies, her usual adorable smile plastered onto her face. Irene rolls her eyes and scoots her chair closer to her own wife.

"BEEF!!! BEEF BEEF BEEF," Yeri begins to shout noticing Irene starting to fume.

"YERI GO PLAY!" Irene commands, turning her child around and lightly shoving her.

Joy had a tendency to seem flirty with everyone she came in contact with. She would never cheat on her wife, but it was just natural for her to be friendly. And if she's being honest, she only came

into the party because she knew it would bother her sister. And also because she was invited on Facebook by some random child named Lil Peni\$ with the most bizarre message.

It read exactly:

I'm so sorry. Keep reading on, or die tonight at exactly 12:42. This is based on a TRUE STORY! Once there was a baby girl named Yeri. Her mother couldn't take all the crying, so she decided it was time for her to go. She buried her baby alive in her back yard. After she buried her she could still hear Yeri crying. So she dug her back up and stabbed her one time in the arm, and buried her again. Yeri cried harder, but a few hours later it stopped. At exactly 12:42, Yeri died. She bled to death. Now her sprite haunts the world. When you're sleeping, she stabs you in the arm and watches you bleed to death. And that's how she got the name "Bloody Yeri" this is the true story of her. She wants everyone to feel her pain that she felt. This isn't fake. Apparently, if you copy and paste this and invite 10 friends in the next ten minutes TO CHOERRY'S QUINCEANERA you will have the best day of your life tomorrow. You will either get kissed or asked out, if you break this chain you will see a little dead girl in your room tonight. In the next 53 minutes someone will say I love you or I'm sorry to 12 other hoes you will have the best day of your life tomorrow. But if you break this chain you die at exactly 12:42 tonight by Bloody Yeri. Don't believe me? You'll see

COME TO CHOERRY'S QUINCEANERA!

"We just came to drop this cake order off! Have you seen Jinsol Kim?" Wendy asks.

"Wendy!" Jinsol arrives just in time. "Thank you so much for making this, I know how busy your bakery is."

Jinsol couldn't get Jiwoo considering the celebrity was neck deep in her own tears, so Wendy's bakery "Wendy's" was the next best thing.

"It's no problem really! It's the least we could do." Wendy says.

On the other side of the beach, a deranged looking Nayeon Park fumbles onto the party. She was told to stay in the car, but she climbed out of the window in sheer carnal rage.

"The good time has arrived!" She says, throwing her hands up in the air. It doesn't even take long before Yeojin stops her from moving any further, Choerry following right behind.

"SECURITY!" Yeojin calls into her earpiece, and Johnny from school appears almost out of thin air.

"Come on, you can't have a party without me!" Nayeon says fighting Johnny. "Right Choerry? You want me here, we're still besties?"

Before Yeojin can smack her classmate (Well, ex-classmate. The girl had, after all, just been expelled.) Choerry moves to stand face to face with Nayeon.

"No Nayeon. I don't want you here. You're a terrible person, and I'm so glad that I never have to see you again. And all my friends now are better friends than you will ever be. So get the FRICK out of my party."

"YEAH." Yeojin says, feeling the need to backup her crush, despite her cringe-worthy word choice.

“Whatever, you can’t get rid of-”

“*NAYEON!*”

Suddenly, Joy Park approaches with Wendy by her side, stunning the crowd of children that have come to watch the drama.

“Your mother and I told you to stay in the car!” Wendy says sternly.

“Well I don’t want to!” Nayeon states.

“FIRST IT’S EXPULSION, AND NOW YOU’RE TALKING BACK TO YOUR MOTHER?” Joy asks angrily, daring Nayeon to respond.

Wendy rubs her wife’s back in order to calm her down a little. Joy just takes a breath and furrows her eyebrows.

“You’re going to boarding school!” screams Joy, clearly still very upset despite her wife’s attempt. “In some terrible state. LIKE ARKANSAS!”

“You’re embarrassing me!” Nayeon whines, but Joy isn’t having any of it.

“Yeah and I’ll keep doing it if you don’t get your spoiled ass into the car *NOW!*”

With a pout, Nayeon stomps up the hill of sand and gets into the car, Joy following to make sure she isn’t left alone again.

Wendy turns to Choerry. “I’m so sorry about that sweetie. I hope you like your cake, tell your mom to order anytime!” With that, the woman gets into the car with the rest of her family and drives away.

“Alright nothing to see here get back to the party!” Yeojin screams, dispersing the audience of children.

The principal’s daughter walks towards Choerry and smiles. “That was FRICKING badass. I’m so proud of you.”

Choerry giggles, blushing without knowing it. “Me too.”

Sooyoung helped Hyejoo pick an outfit for Choerry’s party, when Hyejoo finally agreed to go.

After noticing that her daughter had most of her mirrors covered up, Sooyoung was very careful not to recreate another Hot Topic Overly-Judgemental Mom moment (although she will never understand that cave of a store).

So she let Hyejoo pick out what she was comfortable wearing, instead of forcing a formal and feminine outfit on her. They experimented with some tops together, while Sooyoung helped Hyejoo tuck in her shirt so her daughter would look spiffy.

In the end, Hyejoo quietly picked a black crewneck sweater and some leggings. She looks at home, and it unexpectedly makes Sooyoung warm inside to see her daughter comfortable and happy.

“What should I say to Chaewon?” Hyejoo asked.

“Just listen to her, that’s the most important part.” Sooyoung noted. She’d been doing some rehearsing herself, after all, for when Jiwoo finally came back home . *If*, she should say. “Be a good listener and be nice. I don’t know. Express yourself politely.”

“Did you learn that in therapy?” Hyejoo jokes, looking up at her towering mother.

“Yes,” Sooyoung answers, completely unsarcastically. She fixes up Hyejoo’s collar. “Still learning.”

When the two arrive at the Kim household (which, by the way, is bouncing with the concert’s vibrations), Sooyoung unlocks Hyejoo’s door with a smile.

“Be safe.” she says sternly, as the sea’s wind blows through Hyejoo’s hair. “No getting into stranger’s cars.”

Hyejoo laughs a little as she steps out of the Mercedes. Sooyoung smiles back at her shyly.

Sooyoung had forgotten how much she liked Hyejoo. She’d always known she loved her (That was a given from Day 1.), but there were little things that got lost with time that completely left Sooyoung’s memory. Like the way Hyejoo ran her two fingers against the car window as if she were playing a video game. Or the way Hyejoo giggled when she saw someone in the street spinning a sign.

The duo stare at each other for just a moment longer, while Hyejoo somehow can’t bring herself to close the car door. “Okay bye.”

“Bye,” Sooyoung says awkwardly, with a shy smile as she fiddles with the Mercedes controls to appear busy.

Sooyoung watches her child waddle up to the door, watches until she’s safe inside the Kims’ white walls before driving away.

Hyejoo takes one step into the crowded seaside villa, hoping to lay low when-

“OLIVIA! YOU CAME! YAYAYAYAYAY!” Choerry shrieks in delight, then talks into a bluetooth earpiece behind her purple hair. “Operation Wolf Butterfly is a go,” she says seriously.

“You got it, I’m about to piss on the camel.” Yeojin says back into Choerry’s ear.

“What?!”

“That’s secret agent code for ‘I will get Chaewon’. Yeri’s too busy doing a recreating ‘Lay All Your Love On Me’ by herself in the ocean.” the principal’s daughter clarifies. (Mamma Mia is Choerry’s favorite movie so obviously, ABBA was in the lineup.)

Choerry runs straight to Hyejoo, engulfing her into her arms making the other yelp.

“I’m so sorry for what I did Olivia, you’re one of the best friends I’ve ever had,” Choerry says

honestly while hugging her tight. “I’m so so sorry I messed things up, I didn’t mean to...”

“It’s- It’s okay, Choerry.”

“You mean so much to me and I never ever want to lose you,” Choerry says honestly, suddenly choking up.

“Are you..? Are you crying?” Hyejoo asks.

“NO!” Choerry sobs, clearly in tears. “I JUST LOVE YOU A LOT OKAY AND I NEVER WANT US TO FIGHT AGAIN!”

“Okay, okay,” Hyejoo laughs. “Alright.” The other eighth grader hugs her back. “I love you... too.”

“WHAT!” Choerry screams into Hyejoo’s ear, ripping their embrace apart while Hyejoo cringes. “WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY!”

“I said fuck off,” Hyejoo grumbles playfully.

“Awwwwwww,” Choerry melts. “I love you so- WAIT! I HAVE TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING!” Choerry takes Hyejoo’s hand, and runs her through the crowd.

Choerry takes Hyejoo up the house’s spiral staircase, through the long white corridors. Hyejoo is completely clueless.

“Choerry, where are we goi-”

“Here we are!” Choerry says, as they stop right in front of the class president’s bedroom. The door is shut.

Without another word, Choerry opens the door and shoves Hyejoo in.

“HEY-” Hyejoo yelps, but Choerry holds the door shut.

Hyejoo turns to the room, and is shocked at the sight.

Choerry has cleared all the furniture, moving all of it (even her own bed) against the walls.

She has done her best to replicate the decor of a middle school dance, with streamers and galaxy ceiling lights from Party City and a speaker playing a slow, soft song. With the curtains blocking the daylight, Choerry has turned her bedroom into a St. Jiho’s dance floor.

And in the middle of it all, Chaewon stands, looking at Hyejoo nervously.

“Hi,” she starts softly. The blonde plays with the hem of her bright yellow dress.

Hyejoo’s heart leaps all the way up to lodge itself right in her throat. “Hi,” she chokes out. It’s hard to keep up the mad front when the one you love watches you in awe, even more beautiful than the last time you saw her.

“I’m so happy you came,” Chaewon says apprehensively.

Hyejoo plays with her fingers in nervousness, then turns around to face the door.

“No, Oli, please-” Chaewon calls. “Please don’t leave.”

Hyejoo’s hand hovers over the door handle, but she doesn’t move it.

Chaewon walks up to her slowly, then puts her hand over Hyejoo’s.

Then, she wraps her arms around her best friend, hugging her from behind.

“...I’m so sorry I hurt you,” Chaewon whispers.

Hyejoo fiddles with the door handle. “...You don’t have to pretend just to make me feel better.”

Chaewon hugs Hyejoo’s center tighter. “I’m not pretending.” She rests her cheek on the back of Hyejoo’s sweater, and at the scent of her Hyejoo remembers just how much she was lost without her company.

“I don’t ever want to get used to being without you,” Chaewon admits into the other girl’s back.

Hyejoo’s lower lip begins to tremble.

“You don’t like me like I like you,” she whispers.

“I like you more than I like pizza,” Chaewon starts. “I like you more than... Than those pictures of baby cows sitting in the grass.”

Hyejoo smiles just a little.

“I like you more than that one time I found diamonds in the cave under our house,” she says, referring to one of their many Minecraft worlds. “...I think that if I ever have a house with anyone in real life, I would want it to be with you.”

Hyejoo lets tears escape from her eyes from what feels like the trillionth time this year.

“I love you so much,” Chaewon whispers, while Hyejoo begins to shake. “But you never let me finish talking to you at the dance. I don’t ever want to lose you.”

“Me neither,” Hyejoo whispers back, feeling slightly embarrassed now that this whole thing could have been avoided if she hadn’t left the dance so quickly because of her own insecurities. “I love you too.”

“FUCK BEING GOOD I’M A BAD BITCH. I’M SICK OF MOTHERFUCKERS TRYNA TELL ME HOW TO LIVE! (FUCK Y’A-” Yeojin’s gritty voice booms through the stereo, as the slow love songs have just suddenly switched to the poorly produced Lil Peni\$ acapella cover of a Megan Thee Stallion song.

“SORRY!” Yeojin yells from outside.

Chaewon and Hyejoo burst into laughter.

Hyejoo turns and nearly passes out from wheezing. Chaewon rushes toward the taller girl for a proper hug, which Hyejoo returns with open arms.

The world has shifted, finally, and for the better.

“LET ME HEAR YOU SCREAM L.A.!” A very familiar voice yells outside from the concert stage. **“I’M LOOKING FOR A VERY SPECIAL GIRL TONIGHT!”**

Chaewon gasps so hard her eyes nearly fall out of their sockets. “Is that-”

“NICKI?!”

When Chaewon and Hyejoo finally run below the promontory and into the sand, Nicki Minaj herself is standing onstage.

“CHAEWON WONG! I NEED EVERYONE HERE TO FIND CHAEWON WONG SO I CAN PULL HER UP ON STAGE FOR THIS PERFORMANCE!” The superstar screams, while the beginning guitar chords of “Starships” boom on an infinite loop. **“I CAN’T START THIS WITHOUT YOU BARBZ!”**

Chaewon is running to the stage like a rabid animal, screaming at the top of her lungs while on the verge of tears. “NICKI! IT’S ME NICKI! I’M HERE!” The crowd begins to part like the Red Sea.

“IS THAT YOU CHAEWON?”

“YES!”

“THIS LITTLE GIRL WITH THE PURPLE HAIR SAYS IT’S YOUR BIRTHDAY!” Nicki shouts, pointing to Choerry at the side of the stage.

“IT’S- YES! YES!” Chaewon lies while screaming. “IT’S MY BIRTHDAY!” When she gets to the foot of the sandy stage, she’s too short to pull herself up. The crowd of random guests from Facebook, the neighborhood, and St. Jiho’s all join together to boost her up.

When Chaewon gets to her feet and looks Nicki Minaj in the eye, she chokes on a sob.

“Hey I know you, you’re the girl who DMs me journal entries every day!” Nicki says off of the mic. “Awww, sweetie!” Nicki walks closer to take her biggest fan in for a hug, which the crowd adores.

“Y-YOU READ MY MESSAGES?!?!?” Chaewon can’t speak anymore as she sobs her eyes out.

“Yeah, fuck your dad! Hope you worked things out with your bestie.” Nicki embraces the little blonde tight. Chaewon closes her eyes to enjoy the best moment of her life. “Okay, we gotta do this song though.”

“This is my dream-” Chaewon sobs, while Nicki hands her a spare pink mic and signals her sound crew.

“LET’S GO TO THE BEACH-EACH! LET’S GO GET A WAVE!”

Chaewon immediately stops crying and raps the next lyrics perfectly.

Choerry clasps her hands together as she watches the crowd of hundreds of people singing and cheering, while Chaewon has the most memorable day of her life onstage.

“Launching the fireworks now,” Yeojin says through her earpiece.

“Okay,” Choerry says with the brightest smile.

It’s the eighth grader’s best birthday yet.

Sooyoung Ha places her keys in the diamond encrusted bowl beside the front door. Dog is nowhere to be seen, but Sooyoung’s not worried; the little boy likes to wander all throughout the property and never goes too far.

Sooyoung looks around the vacancy of her massive home. Hyejoo barely makes a sound around her, but the house feels one million times lonelier without her.

A craving in Sooyoung’s stomach begins to set in, as the bowl of mangoes in the kitchen catch her eye. If someone doesn’t eat them now, they’ll rot.

Grabbing one of the bright fruits from the bowl, she finds a sharp knife beside the sink. *How do you even cut these things, anyway?* Jiwoo was the one who did all the cutting of the fruit. The wife’s heart falls once again.

Sooyoung holds the mango in her hand, and the knife in her other. The blade gets caught on the fruit’s giant seed.

Sooyoung pulls forward to get it to budge, but exerts too much force and feels a white hot slash across her hand.

“Shit,” she whispers, as her blood begins to mix with the colors of the fruit. The mango drops to the floor. “Shit, shit shit,” she whispers, clutching her bloody hand. The cut is deep.

Rushing up the grand foyer as she tries to stop the bleeding, she bounds toward the master bedroom, the only place where the bathroom has a first-aid kit under the sink. *Why did it have to be so far away?*

The CEO sits on the toilet seat and sloppily pours sanitizing alcohol all over the cut. Sooyoung hisses in excruciating pain, her whole body shaking.

She curses more under her breath as the first-aid kit spills its contents onto the floor. Sooyoung fishes around for the gauze.

As she uses her mouth and hand to poorly wrap the wound, she hears Dog begin to bark, as if wondering where Sooyoung went.

“Not now, please,” she barely manages to whisper as the volume of his barks shocks her into pressing the cut too hard.

The door to the bathroom leans open.

Jiwoo gasps at the sight.

When they make eye contact, Sooyoung and Jiwoo are frozen solid.

Jiwoo didn’t think her wife would be home.

“Ji-” Sooyoung stammers

She is immediately cut off by Jiwoo closing the door back up and walking away, trying to convince herself that nothing happened. Sooyoung isn’t even sure it did, or if her eyes had just deceived her.

Every bit of her body wills her to chase her greatest love down, to apologize for anything and everything there was that broke them like this. But Sooyoung is anchored to her seat, not only because of the uncut gauze, but also because Tzuyu’s words echo nonstop in her head. *Give her space.*

Sooyoung trembles as she attempts to compose herself, forcing her hand to reach for the bandages once more.

Before she can even resume, Jiwoo suddenly walks back into the bathroom.

She paces right in front of Sooyoung, and Sooyoung expects to be slapped for all she’s done. She screws her eyes shut.

When she opens them, she sees that Jiwoo is quietly on her knees, looking for more bandages.

In complete silence, without even looking her wife in the eye, Jiwoo carefully takes Sooyoung’s bleeding hand and wraps the gauze around. Sooyoung’s mouth has fallen open in complete surprise.

Jiwoo doesn’t say a word even as a whole minute passes, and her hand is almost finished.

The silence is broken when Sooyoung uses her free hand to cover her eyes.

“Did I press too hard?” Jiwoo asks, ever so quietly.

Sooyoung simply sobs into her fingers. Jiwoo sucks her lips in to fight back her own tears, but fails miserably.

“J-Jiwoo-”

“Don’t.” Jiwoo whispers with closed eyes. Tears roll down faster than she can control. “Don’t, Sooyoung.”

“I’m so sorry,” Sooyoung breathes anyway. “I’m so, so sorry Jiwoo, I-”

Jiwoo opens her wet eyes and stares at Sooyoung resentfully. At the sight of her wife, Jiwoo crumbles and looks away.

“Jiwoo- I-”

“How could you say that to me?” Jiwoo asks in a broken whisper, her voice barely audible in the home they’ve built together.

“I don’t- I didn’t mean it I-”

“I... I know I’m not the brightest bulb in the shed,” Jiwoo cries weakly. “Don’t you think I know that? Don’t you think I haven’t gotten that already?”

“Jiwoo, don’t say that about yourself please-”

“I know I’m not the brightest but I never had to hear it from you,” Jiwoo says, her voice coming back to her now.

Sooyoung is at a loss for words. Nothing she could say, anyway, could make it right.

Instead of absolving her wife of anything, Jiwoo cries into her hands torn. She doesn’t know what to believe anymore. She’s a stupid fool, just like Sooyoung had said.

“Jiwoo I- I’ve started going to therapy and- and I’ve apologized to Hyejoo, I know I’ve been awful but-” Sooyoung’s breath gets caught in her throat and the sounds of Jiwoo’s sobs. “But I’m trying,” she whispers.

Jiwoo looks unimpressed as she refuses to look Sooyoung in the eye.

“I’m sorry,” Sooyoung offers weakly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to talk so much. If you want me to leave you alone, I understand.”

Jiwoo mends their eye contact.

Nothing that Sooyoung says can prove she will change.

“I just came to get my things,” Jiwoo whispers emotionally.

Sooyoung sits at the edge of their bed, tortured by the sight of Jiwoo through her closet and bagging many of her clothes. Her wife shuts her eyes; it’s too painful to watch.

Jiwoo’s footsteps grow closer. Just as Sooyoung thinks her wife is about to leave, Jiwoo stops in front of Sooyoung.

Suddenly, she leans down. “I’m glad you’re going to therapy,” Jiwoo whispers sincerely, then plants a soft, lasting kiss on her wife’s forehead.

Sooyoung leans to relish in the moment, but as quickly as it came, it disappears, as Jiwoo picks up a bag of her clothes, and walks out the door.

Chapter End Notes

tell me all your thoughts RIGHT NOW bc this chapter <33333

End Notes

ask us things

- curiouscat.me/catmsdqna (Cat)

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